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"LOOK, SYBIL! OH, GOD, LOOK THERE!" SHE GASPED.

Little Hurricane, THE BOY CAPTAIN;

OR,

The Oath of the Young Avengers.

BY OLL COOMES,

AUTHOR OF "OLD SOLITARY," "LITTLE TEXAS,"
"EAGLE KIT," "SILVER STAR," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE OATH.

"You and each of you do solemnly promise and declare before the ever-living God that you will never ease, so long as life is spared you, in the pursuit of my murderers and until you have brought them all to justice, rescued my children and fathomed the mystery of last night's bloody and cowardly crime?"

"I do!" was the solemn response that came promptly from each of seven pairs of white, quivering lips.

The scene was a tragic one—the time, early morn.

The warm sun had just risen above the eastern hills and shining through the open door of the cabin fell, for the last time, upon the face of the old ranchman, Ishmael Langdon, who was reclining upon a pallet of furs and blankets that was wet with his own life-blood. The pallor of death was upon the old man's face. He was fast sinking, and when he had heard that response from the lips of those to whom he had administered a solemn oath, he sunk back upon his couch with a smile upon his lips, and stretching forth his arms as if to embrace an angel spirit hovering near, he cried out in a clear, strong voice:

"Father, thy will be done!"

Then his arms fell limp at his side, he rattled in his throat and Ishmael Langdon was dead—lying in the presence of—

Philip Radley, aged twenty-one, and employee as herdsman of the dead ranchman.

Kit Hammer, aged twenty, and employee as herdsman of the dead ranchman.

Mike Ford, aged nineteen, a hunter and trapper.

Asa Martin, aged seventeen, companion of Ford.

Harry Reynolds, aged eighteen, ranger and scout.

Coyote Sam, about seventeen, a Sioux Indian, and prairie nomad.

Dick Waters—better known as Vagabond Dick—perhaps sixteen or seventeen years of age.

These were the individuals to whom the oath was administered as they stood in line by Ishmael Langdon's couch, each grasping the muzzle of a rifle. They were rough and stalwart young fellows—born on the frontier and reared amid its excitements, its dangers and its hardships—perfect in physique—strong, agile and sinewy as panthers—brave and daring—skillful hunters and horsemen—unerring shots with rifle or revolver.

The most conspicuous character among them

was Harry Reynolds, better known as Little Hurricane, the Boy Ranger. Few men on the plains had greater notoriety as a brave and dashing scout than this boy. He was familiar with every river and mountain within a circuit of five hundred miles. Many had been his dare-devil feats with outlaws and Indians that had won him the name of Little Hurricane.

Another band of seven such characters could scarcely have been found in the West. By chance, however, had they been thrown together. Five miles from Langdon's cabin was a "dug-out" wherein Phil Radley and Kit Hammer often slept of nights during bad weather when tending the herds of Langdon. There had Little Hurricane, young Ford and Martin called, together, about sunset the previous night. A little later Coyote Sam, the Indian boy, made his appearance, and still later the merry-hearted, rollicking Vagabond Dick came whistling across the prairie to the "dug-out" with a saddle of venison on his shoulder. And so the "cowboys" did not go to the ranch for supper that night. They roasted Dick's venison and made a royal feast thereon.

A pack of greasy cards, story telling, singing and dramatical performances by Coyote Sam and Vagabond Dick, kept the night around that dug-out hilarious with the shouts and laughter of a wild, innocent carouse.

Before it was fairly light Phil and Kit were off for the ranch. They were accompanied by the other boys who were always welcome visitors at Ishmael Langdon's ranch, and who loved to tarry there in the sunlight of the ranchman's lovely daughters, Edith and Mary. To these rude and uncultured youths the ranch was a sort of a paradise around which hung a mysterious power they could not resist—the power of woman's magic and woman's love.

When the party reached the threshold of the Langdon ranch, they were almost stricken dumb with the horrible sight that met their eyes. The old ranchman lay upon a pallet bleeding to death from a bullet-wound in the breast. His daughters were gone, and from the lips of the dying man they listened to this story:

"We waited supper until late for Phil and Kit. About ten o'clock a light covered vehicle drove up to the door. A woman and three men alighted therefrom and entered the house. The men were in mask and wore long black coats and black, slouched hats. The woman wore a black cloak to which was attached a red-lined hood. The latter she removed when she entered the cabin. Her hair was black as jet and hung, loose, about her head, in strands that looked like writhing serpents. Her eyes were black as midnight, her complexion dark almost as a Spaniard's, and her features angular and coarse. I spoke to the party who had intruded so boldly and unceremoniously, when the men drew revolvers and leveling them at me bade me be silent under penalty of death. Then the woman advanced to the terrified girls and taking each by the hand began talking to them in a low, mysterious tone—gazing steadily into the eyes of first the one, then the other. I saw the girls were stricken speechless with the diabolical en-

chantment of that ogress's eyes, and resolved to thwart her designs, I rose and started toward her, but the click of three revolvers whose cold muzzles were pressed against my temples forced me to desist and I sunk back in my seat.

"For several moments the demoness stood before those poor girls—gazing into their eyes—binding their souls in a web of magnetism that they could not resist; on the contrary, she actually compelled them to obey every volition of her will. Presently the woman released their hands, they took their hats and shawls from the wall where they hung and put them on them, and then said, 'Come, girls, with me!' Taking them by the arm she led them to the door and out into the yard, and when I saw them entering the vehicle, I could stand it no longer. 'Villains!' I cried, 'you shall not rob me of my children!' But a blow on the head with the butt of a heavy revolver sent me half-stunned to the floor. I struggled to my feet, when one of the men took a paper from his pocket and holding it out toward me, said: 'Ishmael Langdon, we have a request to make to you, and that is that you sign this paper. We will listen to no refusal—we will brook no delay—have no words about it.' I took the paper and holding it to the light read: 'I, Harrison Dalrymple, now upon my death-bed, but being of sound mind, do, of my own free will give and bequeath unto my beloved friend'—here was a blank—'all my right and title in the Adam Dalrymple estate. Since I die intestate, I am moved to this course out of my love and respect for my dear friend'—here was another blank—'who for weeks has stood by my bedside administering to my dying wants: and in so much as I have spent years of toil and hardship, a stranger from the fortune that was mine by inheritance, it is with a feeling of joy and satisfaction that I, in the last hour of my life—seeing I cannot avert the final end of all—consign that inheritance to my friend and companion who will honor it as he has honored and loved me through years of companionship!'"

"'Gentlemen,' I said, with a feeling of relief, when I'd read the strange document, 'you have struck the wrong man. I am not Harrison Dalrymple, I assure you.' To my disappointment he replied: 'It makes no difference who you are or who you are not, we want you to sign that document, and that without further parley.' 'Sir,' I replied, 'you mean to injure me and my children by some high-handed outrage, or wrong and defraud some one else.' 'That's nothing to you,' the villain retorted; 'I want you to sign this paper, or die. I will give you just three minutes by the watch to do so—sign the name—Harrison Dalrymple.'

"I saw the villains intended to murder me if I still refused their wish, and in hopes of my daughters being released, I took the pen one of the men held already inked and wrote the name requested.

"'Good!' exclaimed one of the villains, glancing at the signature, then, as he folded the paper, he said, 'The witnesses will sign at another time, and now, boys, cap the climax, and let's be off.' Instantly one of the villains raised a revolver and shot me through the breast, and I fell mortally wounded—dead as they believed.

The villains then left the cabin, and, though in the agonies of death, I heard the vehicle rolling away with Edith and Mary. I know not what there is in this mysterious work; I know nothing of Harrison Dalrymple—I never heard the name before. But, of one thing I am certain; those men and that woman are the agents of some foul and desperate work. What part my daughters are to play, God only knows."

This was the strange story the boys listened to from the lips of the dying Ishmael Langdon, and it was to avenge the cowardly murder of the old man, rescue his daughters and fathom the mystery surrounding the whole that they had taken that solemn and sacred oath that made them hunters of men—Avengers.

CHAPTER II.

A RACE WITH ROAD-AGENTS.

THE sharp report of firearms resounded in startling echoes through the foothills and rolled far out upon the plain.

A few minutes later a stage-coach came flying down the Wolf's Mouth Canyon and dashed out into the valley of the Beaver with horses at a sweeping gallop. Sand and dust were ankle deep in the road. The spinning wheels were encircled in a cloud of dust. Upright in his seat sat the driver, his lines in one hand and his whip in the other. His head was hatless, and rolled about upon his shoulders as though in a beastly state of intoxication; but the noble fellow was not drunk. The blood spurting from a wound in his breast from which he had torn his shirt, told that he had received a mortal wound from the rifle of a lurking assassin in the hills. But, true to his trust, the brave man stood to his post and sent his horses flying along the road he had traveled so often, and which was now growing dimmer and dimmer to his eyes that were set in death.

Inside the coach the wildest excitement prevailed, for there were four passengers aboard. Three of these were men—one a young girl, the daughter of Calvin Stewart.

The passengers knew the coach had been fired upon, but little did they dream that their driver had been mortally wounded, for not a word of complaint escaped the brave man's lips.

Mr. Stewart and the other two passengers endeavored to cheer and encourage the almost frantic girl.

Meanwhile, with revolvers in hand, they awaited the approach of the road-agents. They expected them to burst from the cloud of dust that hung along the trail at any moment, for above the noise of the rattling wheels and creaking springs, they could hear the yells of the outlaws that were in swift pursuit.

All of a sudden, a single horseman was seen to spring like magic from the plain on the right, and a little before the coach, and come flying across the valley as if to head the team off.

"Ah! see that fellow yonder!" cried Calvin Stewart; "he is riding to head us off, Mr. Blake."

Mr. Blake removed his gloves from his small,

lily-white hands and for a moment looked steadily at the horseman, then drew his revolver.

"You are a good shot, Mr. Stewart," he said; "here, take my revolver and shoot the fellow when he comes up."

Mr. Stewart took the revolver, dropped the glass panel in the door of the coach, and awaited the approach of the horseman. He was now about fifty rods away and coming toward them rapidly. He was mounted upon a clean-limbed, long-bodied bay horse that showed evidence of remarkable speed; it was caparisoned with a light saddle and bridle.

As the rider drew nearer, Mr. Stewart saw that he was a young man, a mere boy who was dressed in the garb of a ranger, and a doubt at once rose in his mind as to his being a road-agent.

A bend in the road suddenly revealed a dozen outlaws in pursuit. They were some four hundred yards behind. Stewart saw that the boy approaching glanced first at the coach and then at the road-agents as if measuring the distance between the two. And suddenly the youth raised his rifle and with his horse at full run, fired a shot at the road-agents. To his wonder and surprise he saw one of the outlaws' horses plunge forward and fall, throwing its rider violently to the earth.

"By heavens! that fellow is a friend!" cried Stewart, removing his revolver from the window.

"Don't be deceived, Mr. Stewart," said Blake nervously.

The next moment the boy dashed alongside the coach and looked in upon the passengers, with face flushed with wild excitement and his eyes flashing like two orbs of fire.

"You are in danger, folks!" he cried.

"Yes; can you assist us, boy?" returned Stewart.

"I can try, sir, but the odds are against us. I see you have a woman with—"

"My daughter, boy, and for God's sake help us if you can!"

"Do you know your driver lays dead in the boot?" the boy asked.

"What!" Stewart almost shrieked. "Oh, God! then we are in danger of being hurled into a chasm and dashed to pieces at any moment!"

"Steady, strangers, and I'll see if I can't get onto the coach," said the boy, riding closer to the spinning wheels, and handing his rifle and well-filled cartridge belt to Mr. Stewart. Then he drew up one foot and placed it under him on the saddle, reached up and caught hold of the iron railing on the coach, then made a spring and landed in the boot, while his horse, now riderless, dashed on down the road ahead of him.

The boy had great difficulty in wresting the lines from the iron grip of the dead driver, and when he had accomplished this task, he found it necessary to drop the body of the faithful old man by the road-side—not only to lighten the coach but to give him ample room to manage the frantic horses.

Fortunately the horses kept the road they had traveled so often, else the chase would no doubt

have ended ere this by the coach being dashed to pieces.

Still on behind came the road-agents—gaining rapidly upon the coach. The boy saw that they would soon be overtaken—that something must be done if capture would be averted. Leaning over the side of the coach he shouted to the passengers.

"Strangers, pass my rifle and belt up here, please."

Mr. Stewart did as requested under protest of Mr. Blake, who still doubted the character of the boy.

The young driver set the heavy whip in the whip-stock and fastened the lines around it. He then took a cartridge from his belt and inserted it in his rifle, and turning he placed one knee in his seat, rested his gun on the mailbags on top of the coach, and, despite the rocking of the coach, he took aim and fired.

True to the aim of the wonderful marksman the bullet went home and an outlaw fell to the earth. This checked the others and enabled the coach to gain some upon them, but the report of the rifle set the horses wilder than ever with affright and it became necessary for the boy to lay down his rifle and take up the lines.

Suddenly one of the passengers called out:

"Young man, do you want help up there?"

"Yes, I do," responded the youth—"some one to handle the lines while I handle the rifle."

Quickly, and with remarkable ease and dexterity Mr. Blake swung himself out of the coach and climbed to the top and took a seat by the boy. As the youth placed the lines in the man's small white hands he saw they were delicate as a woman's hands—that they had never worn the callous of labor. In fact, the man's smooth-shaven face, his general appearance and his pleasing address were strong characteristics of a sedate gentleman who, in the very face of danger, bore himself with a calm and deliberate coolness that was truly remarkable.

"Can you manage them?" the boy asked, for in those delicate hands it did not seem there could be the strength of a child.

"I can try, my boy," the man replied.

The boy now turned, took up his rifle, inserted a cartridge in it, and laying it upon the mailbag was about to fire on the pursuers again when the wheels of the coach left the smooth, sandy track and began to jolt and bump over the uneven surface of the ground so that it was impossible to take aim.

Glancing back he saw the driver was pulling out of the road.

"Keep them in the track stranger," cried the youth; "keep them in the track, while I pick off a few road-agents."

At this instant a scream issued from the lips of the lady passenger.

"Heavens!" continued the boy. "I wonder what that can mean?"

The driver made no response, but, taking the lines in his left hand, he drew from his breast-pocket a small, silver-mounted revolver and leveling it at the head of the boy, said:

"Boy—vagabond! do you know who I am?"

The look of a demon now sat upon the face of

the passenger Blake, and those soft eyes gleamed with the ferocity of a tiger. A face that could be so easily transformed from the mild-mannered gentleman to that of a demon told of a consummate villain and a murderous heart. The boy was completely taken by surprise, and in an instant it flashed through his mind that the man was a confederate of the masked road-agents coming behind.

"I am Blackhawk Bill, captain of road-agents!" was the startling announcement.

"Oh, the devil you are!" blurted the boy, although the very mention of that name sent a shiver through his frame; "then, sir, let me introduce myself to you as Little Hurricane, captain of the Boy Avengers, and d'ye see that, William?"

Quick, almost as the lightning's flash, the boy's left hand flew upward striking the muzzle of the outlaw's pistol up, at the same time he brought a derringer within an inch of the villain's face with the right.

The outlaw's pistol was discharged over the youth's head. The villain was thunderstruck. The lily-handed desperado, Blackhawk Bill, whose crimes and daring robberies had made him a terror throughout the length and breadth of the Hills, had met his match for once in the person of Little Hurricane. The Boy Captain had the drop on him.

CHAPTER III.

A BOY'S DARING FEATS.

FOR a brief moment the outlaw and the boy glared into each other's eyes. Hurricane's quick brain took in the situation at a glance. For months had he been endeavoring to capture the notorious Blackhawk Bill. Five thousand dollars were offered for him dead, for no one believed he would ever be taken alive. This reward was a fabulous sum to the captain of the Boy Brigade. He had only to press the trigger of his revolver to make himself rich. But he tarried just a moment too long. The horses plunged down a steep bank into Beaver Creek, almost pitching the two antagonists from the coach. Obeying the first impulse of their minds, each seized the right hand of the other in the left, thus preventing the use of their revolvers. In this position they began a desperate struggle.

They were well matched for strength, boy though Little Hurricane was.

They rose to their feet and fought standing in the boat.

The horses plunged and floundered through the water, that was axle deep and flowed with a rapid current.

Suddenly the fore-wheel of the vehicle struck a stone when in the middle of the stream; the combatants lost their balance, and, still locked in each other's embrace, plunged headlong into the creek, and were swept away by the wild, rushing current.

The horses, free of all restraint, rushed through the stream and began to scramble up the bank on the opposite side. The ascent being steep the coach moved slowly. Taking advantage of this moment the young lady passenger, who was wild with terror, threw open the door

of the vehicle and leaped out before her father could arrest her movement. She was immediately followed by the other male passenger at the muzzle of whose revolver Mr. Stewart had sat motionless ever since Blackhawk Bill had climbed on top. He was a confederate of the road-agents, also, and no sooner did he remove his revolver than Mr. Stewart drew his and essayed to follow him. But he was prevented from doing so by the coach reaching the top of the bank, and the horses, cooled and refreshed by their plunge into the water, dashed away at lightning speed.

Meanwhile the pursuing road-agents were not over a hundred yards from the creek, and as he saw the situation from the flying coach Stewart knew that he could do nothing against such odds toward rescuing his child. He knew there was no one upon the coach. He had seen Little Hurricane and the outlaw fall into the stream, and, nerved to desperation, he climbed to the top of the coach, gathered up the lines from the horses' very heels, and began talking to the frantic beasts to quiet them down and husband their strength, for the race was still to continue.

At this juncture, a scream burst upon his ear from the rear of the coach. Stewart turned his head, and, to his utter astonishment beheld a nondescript rise up from among the mail-bags, baggage, and the rubber blankets spread over them. It was human—it was a female—a wild-eyed girl of perhaps fourteen years of age, with large, lustrous eyes and a beautiful face that was half hidden in a wealth of snarled and tangled hair. She was clad in a frock of some coarse material. Her feet and ankles were clad in new shoes and stockings.

"Good God! child, where did you come from?" exclaimed Stewart.

The girl shook back the hair from her face and eyes as she stood kneeling on the coach, and said:

"From under this heap of blankets and truck. Hank Bond hid me there—where is Hank? and what's all this racket about?"

"Child, Hank is dead! The road-agents killed him, and are after us. Who are you?—what's your name?"

"Poor Hank!" the girl said, her voice quivering with emotion; then as a thought occurred to her, her eyes flashed as she continued; "my name is Sybil—hav'n't got any more name, 'cept nick-names. I lived up to C—, but I hated everybody there because they knocked me around, and called me Orphan Sib, and Beggar Sib, and so I just thought I'd run away from there and go to where good people lived. Hank Bond was always kind to me and so I packed all my clothes, and that wasn't many, in that old carpet-sack of Hank's, and then I hid under these things where Hank told me to stay till we were away from the town and until he called me. I almost died there, the coach bumped so, and I just couldn't stand it any longer, and so I got out. Poor old Hank! no wonder he didn't call me. He was the best friend I ever had since my father died."

"Cheer up, Sybil, and I will be a friend to you," replied Stewart, deeply touched by the little girl's sorrow; "my poor girl is in the power of the road-agents yonder, and others are after us."

"Oh, curse the road-agents!" the rude, irreverent girl exclaimed, her big dark eyes flashing with a revengeful light as she snatched up the derringer that Little Hurricane had dropped in the seat; "they killed my father and Hank Bond, and I will avenge them! I can shoot—shoot to kill!"

She turned around, and, still kneeling, began firing at the nearest outlaw with a coolness that told she was no novice in handling a revolver. The pursuers were now close upon them, and at the third shot the foremost fellow leaped straight up in his saddle and clutched frantically at the reins. He stopped his horse, reeled in the saddle and finally sunk to the earth.

"Oh, oh!" the desperate girl exclaimed, "I plugged one of the scamps, so I did, mister!"

With the fall of this outlaw the pursuit of the coach ended. The road-agents all returned to the creek where Clara Stewart was held a captive. They were discussing the situation—the almost complete failure of their attack on the coach, when, suddenly, the figure of a man appeared above the bank of the creek, the picture of forlorn wretchedness. It was the gallant captain of the road-agent, Blackhawk Bill. He was just out of the water, hatless, dejected, and with a lacerated, bleeding face.

"Hail, captain!" shouted one of the outlaws, "where in heaven's good name have you been?"

"In the river," was the reply; "curses on it! didn't you see me roll off the coach with that fellow? Where were your eyes? why did you hang back like a pack of cowards? If you'd come to my assistance we'd killed that boy. It was Little Hurricane!"

An exclamation of surprise burst from the lips of the road-agents.

"Where is he now?"

"Dead, I hope!" retorted the disgruntled chief; "we became separated while struggling like a pair of water-rats under the water, and when I rose to the surface and got my eyes cleared and my lungs emptied, he was nowhere to be seen. But we'll have him dead or alive. Let that coach go, men, and ride down the creek and find that boy dead or alive. His horse turned off just before we came to the creek, and is down the stream somewhere. We'll secure it, too, for it's the fastest animal in this country."

There were ten of the road-agents, and all but Blackhawk and another that had been wounded wore black masks over their faces—faces that in some community perhaps passed for those of honest men.

Blackhawk Bill led the search for Little Hurricane. Clara Stewart was left in charge of a wounded outlaw, and he who had been a passenger on the coach, who at once placed her upon a horse and then mounting themselves, crossed the river and rode slowly back toward the hills.

They had gone perhaps a mile when they heard a shout behind them, and looking back they saw one of their masked comrades riding swiftly toward them—swinging his white hat and yelling in triumph.

"By Je-rusalem!" exclaimed one of the outlaws, "that's Grill and he's got the prize—captured the horse of Little Hurricane!" and

then the two shouted back their congratulations in lusty tones.

They knew Grill by his white hat and velvet coat.

A mile further down the valley came Blackhawk Bill and his other followers riding at a breakneck speed and yelling like infuriated demons.

The man on the noble racer of Little Hurricane dashed alongside of Miss Stewart's captors. His mask was still over his face. His broad-brimmed hat replaced upon his head, was slouched around his head. His black velvet coat that was buttoned over his breast, was spattered with blood. His hands, too, had blood upon them.

"Hullo, friend Grill, you've drawn a prize," said one of the outlaws.

"Yes, two of them!" coolly replied the man addressed as Grill, and whipping out a revolver he thrust it toward the outlaw and fired. With scarcely a moan the deluded wretch rolled lifeless from his saddle, and before the wounded man could realize the situation he, too, fell dead—shot down by the supposed Grill.

A cry of terror escaped Clara Stewart's lips.

"Courage, fair girl," said the slayer, tearing the mask from his face and revealing the boyish yet triumphant features of Little Hurricane, "courage, and ride, ride for your life."

Clara saw the face was that of the brave boy who had come to their assistance when in the coach, and taking courage, she rode fearlessly along at the side of the wild, daring young ranger.

Little Hurricane now stripped himself of the coat and hat that he had taken from the outlaw Grill down the creek, retaining his revolver only.

The fugitives turned northward and kept the Beaver Valley close in at the foot of the long range of foot-hills. Blackhawk Bill pressed on in pursuit. As they sped along they conversed freely. Clara made known to her rescuer all that had transpired on board the coach from the time they were first fired upon until they had crossed the river.

"Then your father escaped in the coach?" Hurricane said.

"Yes, sir; the outlaws gave up the chase to go in search of you."

"May I inquire your name and where you are going, miss?"

"My father's name is Stewart—my name Clara Stewart. We were on our way to visit an old friend of father's named Ishmael Langdon, who resides at his cattle-ranch on the Cheyenne."

"Ishmael Langdon!" exclaimed the boy, and he was about to tell her of the death of Langdon and the abduction of his daughters, but his better judgment prevailed and he went on: "I know Mr. Langdon well; he has two fair girls, Edith and Mary, who I am afraid are exposed to constant dangers. In fact, no woman is safe in this country unless inside a military post, or surrounded by a body guard of troops."

"Oh, what a dreadful journey to-day has been, young man, and—"

"Please call me Harry Reynolds, or Little Hurricane."

"You Little Hurricane, the Boy Ranger?"

"Yes, ma'am, I'm that very chap, and I know you're s'prised—you expected to see more of a man and less of a little prairie vagabond."

"You do yourself injustice, Hurricane; indeed, I am rejoiced to know you are Little Hurricane," replied the girl, with a look of admiration beaming in her bright, blue eyes, and her pretty face glowing with confidence and faith; "I am sure no one but Little Hurricane could ever have performed such daring, reckless feats as Little Hurricane has performed to-day."

"Thanks, Miss Clara, for your compliment; I like adventure all the more when there is a pretty girl in it; but dangers have been 'most too numerous to-day to make it healthy and romantic."

In the mean time, Blackhawk Bill and his followers were pressing on after the boy and girl, and appeared to be gaining upon them. Little Hurricane had to hold in his horse to keep pace with that of Clara, although the girl's horse was exerting itself to its utmost. Finally the boy said:

"I'm afraid your horse will not hold out, Miss Clara, but mine will, so you need have no fears. If we can keep out of the road-agents' hands until dark, I think we will strike the camp of the Boy Brigade—six of my comrades—who are encamped somewhere along the Beaver above here."

But this hope was not to be realized, for after two hours more of hard riding, Clara's horse became quite lame and exhausted. The pursuers were gaining rapidly upon them.

"There, Clara, take my horse," said the boy, stopping both horses, "and keep right on up the Beaver till you strike the camp of six boys who will—"

"But you, Hurricane—"

"Never mind me, Miss Clara; I'll dodge them outlaws in that canyon—come, do not hesitate—do not tarry—every moment is precious—you must flee on my horse—it's your only hope this side of the grave!"

Still Clara hesitated, fixing her eyes upon those of the brave boy. Her lips quivered and she was about to speak when Hurricane went on:

"Do, Clara, do go for my sake."

This final appeal reached the girl's heart, and leaping to the ground she allowed the boy to assist her to the back of his horse, then with a few tender words of parting she galloped away.

Little Hurricane watched her a moment then turned and glided into the mouth of the canyon on his left. He ran on until he was out of sight of the road-agents when he stopped and crawled into a clump of bushes and tall dead grass. It was a poor hiding-place, but this very fact, it occurred to him, might make it a secure one. The outlaws would not expect to find him in such a place when the dark recesses of the canyon offered secure concealment, but a few rods further on. And in this he was right, for, true enough, the pursuers came up and while Blackhawk Bill and another went on in pursuit of Clara Stewart, the others whirled to the left

and, galloping within twenty feet of our hero, swept on up the canyon.

Little Hurricane watched them with a smile upon his face; when they were out of sight he began speculating upon his chances of escape either by flight or by remaining there until the foe had come down out of the canyon and passed on.

The cluster of bushes in which he lay was some thirty feet in length, by ten or fifteen in width. It was full of tall, dead grass, some of which stood erect and some was down and tangled. This suggested the idea of burrowing himself like a rabbit under it, and he was in the act of doing so when the cold muzzle of a revolver touched his forehead and starting back he beheld, to his inmost horror, a human form already burrowed under the grass and vines before him, while along the deadly tube leveled at his brain he saw an orb of glittering fire set in a grizzled, hairy face!

CHAPTER IV.

DOOMED TO DIE.

LITTLE HURRICANE could not have felt more horrified had he been transfixed by the onchament of a deadly serpent's eyes. He gazed steadily into the orbs of the unknown while he busied his fertile brain trying to devise some way out of what seemed an eminently perilous position. The unknown seemed to have divined his very thoughts, and in a low tone that seemed more like the hiss of a deadly serpent, he whispered:

"Move a muscle or utter one yawp, youngster, and by the sword o' Dam-ocles, I'll russel you into eternity quicker nor a hound pup can lick a skillet. 'Sdeath!"

By these words of caution the boy was relieved of his greatest fear. He knew the unknown was, at least, an enemy of the road-agents.

"Who the furies are you, anyhow?" asked Hurricane in a whisper.

"'Sh! don't I tell you I'll shoot? don't you see I mean to blow your head clear off if you don't keep still?" replied the human enigma.

"Old idiot, ar'n't I keepin' still?" was Hurricane's response.

"No; I see I've got to scatter your brains all over the canyou—say yer prayers, quick and—"

At this juncture the report of a pistol came rolling down the canyon. The unknown's words were cut short. He involuntarily turned his eyes up the valley, the muzzle of his revolver falling out of line with the boy's head as he did so; and when he again turned that blazing orb on the youth he found, to his horror, *himself* looking into the *boy's* revolver.

"Dam-ocles!" burst in a hoarse, jerky tone from the man's lips, as he discovered the lad had the drop on him; "easy there, lad—circumstances alters cases, you know. Who be you, anyhow?"

"I'm your match," replied the boy, "you can rest assured of that."

"Dam-na-ocles! don't I admit it? can't you be reasonable? can't you tell an old man your name?"

"Little Hurricane," answered the boy.

"Jumpin' J'osaphat!" thrusting forward a thin, bony hand, "put it there, Little Cyclone, and have the sublime honor o' pressin' the honest palm o' Jack Drew, hunter and trapper, out o' business for reasons too numerous to mention. God bless you, boy, I've hearn o' you millions o' times—please turn that barker to one side—that hole'n it looks like etarnity's darkness and ye might be narvous and let the p'izen thing flicker."

Little Hurricane took the proffered hand of the man he could not see—of a man he had never seen; but he knew by his warm, friendly clasp that Jack Drew was not to be feared and so he lowered his revolver.

"There now," continued the man with an air of relief, "that's a deal healthier—more comformatical; but I say, Hurry Littlecane, you had a close call—dodged them bloody tallywhoopers with all the hu-gigrosity of an old campaigner; whose gal war that?"

Hurricane told the man all he felt it was safe to on such short acquaintance, then he inquired after the hunter's movements in that vicinity, and received this reply:

"I've been operating up on the range, but the Injins have broke out worse nor the seven-year itch in a nigger school, and are mowin' a wide swath o' destruction. I knowed it would come. Sittin' Bull's been sp'ilin' for a fight and scalps these many moons, and so you can just jot it down that we're going to have the liveliest Injin fracas that's been seen since the ark o' old Noah swung over the hills o' Asia Minor. Hundreds o' lives'll be lost afore the govermental troops can polish up their buttons and shine their boots ready to begin a campaign. I've been layin' in these parts a week or two—roosting up the creek—waitin' to see what course the red devils'll take. I war takin' a little ramble down this way when I see'd you folks flyin' north'ards like the wind, and not knowin' edzactly what stand to take in the matter, I russeled myself into port here and lay to, and here I'm going to stick till the storm blows over, or till I'm forced to vacate. Don't give me away, Cyclone, if they should return and diskiver you. If, however, they do find you, and don't purpose to give you a fair shake, I'll rise up here like a pestilence in an alligator swamp, and paint destruction on the skies. You understand what I mean, boy? and you'll find I'm a holy snorter when I let myself loose—when I take the bits in my mouth and lay back on my pasterns. Why, sir, the roses and sweet williams bloom over the graves o' dozens o' fellers that undertook to buck me. Yes, sir'ee—"

"Hark!" commanded Hurricane, "they're coming back!"

The man drew back his hand, spread the grass over his face and relapsed into a dead silence.

Down apast the thicket sped the road-agents, but as the last one passed he cast a glance toward it, and reining in his horse, shouted to his comrades:

"Hold, boys! here's our kid in the brush!"

Little Hurricane knew he had been discovered, and leaping to his feet with his course of action marked out, he opened fire on the outlaw with

his revolver. The first shot missed, but it cut so close to the villain's head that to save himself he slipped from his saddle to take refuge behind his horse. But scarcely had he quitted the stirrups ere the boy leaped forward, bounded into the saddle, dealt the outlaw a blow on the head with his Colt that sent him to the earth, then digging his heels into the animal's side, dashed away. But at the same moment a volley of six shots were fired at him, one of which struck the horse in the head and killed it dead. Little Hurricane was thrown violently to the earth and half stunned. Before he could rise he was covered by seven revolvers, seized, disarmed, and his hands bound behind his back.

A short discussion as to what should be done with him ensued. Some were in favor of shooting him down then and there, but the majority favored taking him before the captain alive, and upon this decision they proceeded to act. Mounting their horses the boy was marched off on foot with half a dozen revolvers covering him, and curses of vengeance falling upon his head.

In all his eventful life Little Hurricane had never been in such a perilous predicament; nor he need not have been this time but for his gallantry and self-sacrifice in behalf of Clara Stewart.

The youth was conducted north along the trail of Blackhawk Bill and his companion, and as night was fast approaching he was compelled to move at a double-quick. Darkness, however, finally overtook them, and as the captain was not to be found, their horses being tired and hungry, and the captive an incumbrance, they concluded to bivouac on the open plain and while their animals were grazing dispose of the boy.

Having picketed their horses out to grass they proceeded to organize a mock court for the trial of Hurricane. Two hours at least were spent in this farce, for well enough the prisoner knew what the result would be. Nor was he at all disappointed; the verdict was, guilty of having murdered three of their comrades on that day in the valley of the Beaver and the sentence was—*death!*

By this time the moon was up above the eastern hills making it almost as light as day, and so arrangements were made for the immediate execution of the condemned. The youth was to be shot. He was led out a ways into the valley and his hands and feet tied together. A blindfold was about to be placed over his eyes when he said:

"Do not blindfold me; I am not afraid to look death in the face."

"Whew! but isn't the little cuss game?" exclaimed the road-agent; "I alers he'rd he war plucky and grit to the backbone."

Little Hurricane now felt that the sands of his young life were about run out, although it seemed impossible that he was to die. A feeling of sadness filled his breast as the fair face of Clara Stewart came up before his mental vision. The hills, the prairies and the rivers that he had loved and known so long, would know him no more. Would he be missed? Was there one in all the wide world that would wait and watch for his coming? He looked around

him. Back of him rose the long dark line of ragged hills against the clear western sky. On his right the valley rolled away into the mellow moonlight. Before him—perhaps fifty yards away—were a few clumps of sage brush. Behind him, and a little to the left, were the outlaws' horses.

"Oh, there is so much for me to live for yet!" the youth mused. The thought of escape had never for a moment left his mind, and to that end he tried his bonds, when he found himself standing alone; but they were firm—doubly secure.

Six outlaws with revolvers now arranged themselves in line in front of and about fifteen feet from the youth. The hope the boy had entertained up to this moment now died out. He saw that he must die; but he never uttered a word. He would not beg for life at the hands of such men.

"Ready!" suddenly shouted the outlaw master of ceremonies.

The six executioners raised their revolvers.

Little Hurricane closed his eyes, murmuring a prayer.

With a downward sweep of the hand at each word, the outlaw counted aloud:

"One, two—"

The word *three* was drowned in the crash of firearms that rolled in deep, thunderous echoes through the hills and over the moonlit plains.

CHAPTER V.

A DESERTED CAMP-FIRE AND RIDERLESS HORSE.

THE wrath of an avenging God seemed to have fallen upon the would-be executioners of Little Hurricane, for as that peal of firearms rung out on the night, four of the outlaws fell dead in their tracks, while the others, terror-stricken, turned and fled from the scene of death as if upon the wings of abject fear.

Then forth from behind the clumps of sage brush near—their rifles gleaming in the moonlight, their lips ringing with shouts of triumph—came seven forms directly toward our hero.

Foremost among them Little Hurricane saw a tall, angular figure with a bearded face from whose lips shout after shout of joy leaped forth like claps of thunder.

"Ho, Little Cyclone!" he yelled as he rushed up to the boy, "by the sword o' Dam-ocles! we made the thing tally and turned the tables on them varlets. D'ye remember me, boy? I'm that Sweet William that lay in the thicket in the mouth o' the canyon, and you may jist bet I've been russelin' around to help you out like a bull alligator in a canebrake—struck this squad o' young cyclones who tells me they're the brigade o' Boy Avengers and that you're their captain. Come up now, boys, and congrat yer friend."

As he spoke the old hunter cut the boy's bonds and he was once more a free, wild spirit of the plains.

A little fellow—one of the Brigade—ran up and grasping his hand said:

"Harry Reynolds—Little Hurricane, I thought you war a goner once, by salt-peter! Didn't we have the fullest hand o' trumps tho'?"

"Ay, Vagabond Dick, my noble little friend,"

replied Hurricane, "you certainly beat those outlaws and saved my life."

One by one the Brigade came up and shook hands with their gallant young leader.

It was a joyful meeting after the youth's eventful day alone in the valley of the Beaver. In as few words as possible he narrated his adventures to his comrades; and then to Jack Drew he told the story of the mysterious murder of Ishmael Langdon, and the oath the Brigade had taken to avenge his death and rescue his daughters. The old hunter seemed greatly agitated by this story. In fact, his emotions engendered considerable strange curiosity in the minds of the Brigade.

"Add one to your outfit, boys," he finally said, vehemently, as he appeared to start from a profound meditation, "count me in as one o' your Brigade; I'm not a boy in years, but by the holy eternals, I'm a hull magazine o' fury! I'm wuss nor a speckled alligator in a canebrake on a fight."

Jack Drew was admitted by a unanimous vote to the Boy Brigade.

Little Hurricane, being without weapons of any kind, appropriated a fine rifle, a pair of revolvers and a number of cartridges to his use from among the effects of the dead outlaws.

Seven horses and their caparisons were left behind by the terror-stricken owners, and these the Brigade took into their possession, and then moved on up the creek. Little Hurricane and Jack Drew moved on a ways in the lead. They soon came to where a bend in Beaver Creek intercepted their course. In hopes of finding some trace of Clara Stewart, they began carefully searching the sandy beach. While thus engaged, an exclamation burst from the lips of the Boy Captain, and pointing downward to an impression in the sand he said:

"Moccasin tracks, Drew!"

"They are, by the holy sword o' Dam-ocles! Ingins have been here since dark—not less'n a score o' them. In course they're Settin' Bull's minions, and so we, the Boy Brigade, may look out for frisky times. We may expect Ingins at any time, and these, with Blackhawk Bill's followers o' sin, may make it thunderin' miasmatical for us; but for me, give me fightin' every hour in the day, and I'll show ye a good appetite and a smilin' conscience."

"Ah! I see a light yonder," said the ever-vigilant Hurricane.

"'Tis, by the Jumpin' J'osephat! but it can't surely be red-skins."

"No," replied the young ranger, "a red-skin on the war-path never publishes his location so conspicuously. I should say it were some one who knows little or nothing of the surrounding dangers, and would suggest we look after him."

They moved on and soon found the light was that of a camp-fire that burned on the point of a little strip of land lying in a sharp bend of the creek; but they could see no one around, and so they advanced to it and found it deserted. The fire, however, they knew had been lighted within the past hour, and that a white man had been there was evident from the boot-tracks found

around the fire. But where he had gone and why, they could not form the slightest idea.

"It beats me holler," said old Jack Drew; "but I reckon the Ingins have took the feller in, or else the rooster's hearn us comin' and pulled up and russeled off to the shade."

The rest of the Brigade coming up with the captured horses, a short consultation was held. All were completely mystified by the deserted camp-fire, and many and various were the conjectures as to the mysterious abandonment of the place.

Some of the Brigade expressed a fear that it was a trick of the enemy to entrap them, but Hurricane and Jack Drew did not think so.

"I'll tell ye boys," said Hurricane, "we can plant ourselves right here till mornin', and if the matter's not solved before then, mebbey daylight will help us out."

"That's the music for me," declared old Jack Drew; "we can't make anything by travelin' to-night, for those we seek may double on us in the darkness and we'd then be up a stump."

Yielding to Hurricane's suggestion the Brigade went into camp. The fire, however, was extinguished for fear of its attracting danger. Then Coyote Sam, the young Indian, and Asa Martin were placed on guard, when the others, spreading their blankets on the grass laid down but not to sleep.

The boys were all restless and uneasy, and none more so than Little Hurricane. The fate of Clara Stewart preyed constantly upon his mind, for the face of the lovely girl had left a deep impression on his young heart. Old Jack Drew saw that the spirits of the youth must be depressed, and knowing how essential a buoyancy of spirit was to a fearless and undaunted courage, he endeavored to cheer them up by a series of rollicking, side-splitting yarns.

The sudden bark of a coyote hard by suddenly started the party, for at first it was taken for a human voice disguised.

"Gol—dash the infuriated varmint!" exclaimed Drew, as he settled back into a position of ease, "I hate a coyote next to an Ingin; but speakin' o' coyotes reminds me o' an incident that occurred once down in Colorado. Four o' us was on a big hunt, and we had a little old dried-up cuss with us named—well, we called him Jerky, 'ca'se he looked jist like a chunk o' dried buffalo-meat. He had a mouth on him like a bull alligator, and for new-fangled notions he beat forty blue-bellied Yankees. His likes for conceit hadn't been seen since Noah's ark put into the harbor on Ararat."

"Wal, one night we war laying around camp jist as we are now when a coyote come up and howled, and pranced, and cavorted around us as though it'd take us in boots, and breeches. A lot of others soon come, and great Penticost! sich a tearin' racket I never heard. Jerky finally got wise and informed us he'd show us how to catch coyotes, and tyin' a couple o' long, strong lariats together he took a large, stout fish-hook from among his effects and fastened it to one eend o' the rope. Then he baited the hook with a slice o' fresh buffalo we'd killed that day and carried it out the full length o' the rope and laid it down. Comin' back he sot

down, took the other eend o' the rope in his hand and waited for a bite, with a wise look upon his pinched-up countenance. It war darker than holy old Egypt out beyant the radius of our camp-light, so we couldn't see what war goin' on, but we noticed the coyotes didn't yawp so much arter Jerky'd put out his baited hook.

"Wal, we sot thar, waited, and still sot, and no bite. Jerky looked a little disapp'inted and shaggrinned, and we fellers winked at each other and laughed in our sleeve at his silly yet dogged perseverance. Finally we got tired o' waitin' for him to git a bite, and so we laid down to rest, and told him if he heard from t'other end o' his line to wake us up. I pulled my blanket over my face and watched Jerky out o' one corner o' my eye. Another hour went by and still no coyote. Jerky was grit, and wouldn't give up, although he war tired and sleepy. Finally an ijee struck him. He tied the end o' the lariat 'round his body and laid down, pulling his blanket over him. This I s'posed ended the matter, but Jerky hadn't been down mor'n two minutes afore he jumped up, exclaimin': 'I've got him, boys, got him foul!' I looked and saw somethin' was tuggin' lively at the rope, and before Jerky could unfasten it from around his waist, he was jerked over, and if ever you see'd a man's heels go twinklin' away into the darkness it war Jerky's. The trapper'd been trapped—snatched off out o' sight quicker nor a hound pup could lick a skillet. We sprung to our feet, for we knew the fellow was in danger o' havin' his life thumped out o' him. Away over the plain we could hear his voice trailing off further and further into the night, in wild and lusty cries of 'murder' and for 'help.' We started in pursuit, for we felt sure no animal was at t'other eend o' that rope. Thar war Ingins in the country, and we thought it barely possible that one nosin' around might 'a' hitched his pony on to the rope, and snaked little Jerky from the bosom of his friends. But his cries soon died out, and there being nothin' to guide us, we war forced to give up the hunt and return to camp to mo'rn our loss. We give Jerky up for a bold, dashing, border angel—for dead—and we began to talk up the designs for a monument to be erected on the spot where we last saw the little giant. But in the midst of our deliberations, who should appear in camp but Jerky, a wreck o' his former self. He was voraciously dismantled. He was bloody, bruised and swollen. He looked as though he'd been through a quartz-mill, and then had run the gantlet of four million mules' heels. We questioned him 'bout the t'other eend o' that lariat, but he war as ignorant o' it as the comin' gination is o' heaven and the north pole. He war shaken up so lively that he never had time to think 'bout it, and to this day we don't know who nor what it war that took that feller sky-larkin' that night; but we do know that *big* little Jerky never undertook to catch coyotes 'ith a hook and line again, and—"

The old hunter's words were here cut short by the shrill neigh of a horse just across the creek.

In a moment Little Hurricane was on his feet.

"I'll bet anything that was my horse!" he exclaimed.

Then the young ranger walked down to the water's edge and listened. All was silent. He uttered a peculiar whistle. Again that neigh was heard. The boy continued whistling.

Suddenly a horse plunged into the creek and started across it. It went straight up to Little Hurricane.

In the bright moonlight the Boy Captain saw it was his own horse—bridled and saddled—but it was riderless!

CHAPTER VI.

VAGABOND DICK QUARRELS WITH A FAIRY.

FINDING his horse riderless created a restless fear in the breast of Little Hurricane for the safety of Clara Stewart. She had either quit the saddle through fear or exhaustion, or else had fallen into the hands of foes who had failed to capture the sagacious horse. At any rate, the finding of the horse and the deserted camp-fire convinced the young ranger that there was enough in the mystery to warrant an immediate reconnaissance of the valley; and so he and Vagabond Dick, whom he knew to be a careful and expert scout, set off up the Beaver—Hurricane crossing the stream and going up the right side and Dick the left.

The young scouts were not long in sight of each other after Hurricane crossed to the opposite side. Vagabond Dick crept along in the shadows as much as possible. Half a mile from camp the foot-hills pressed out so closely upon the creek that the valley broke into gentle undulations, and the yawning mouths of canyons and dark, frowning cliffs appeared close on the left. In the mouth of these canyons, and occasionally extending down to the waters' edge, were clumps of trees—stunted cedars or great cottonwoods, with huge short trunks and gnarled, twisted and crooked branches that seemed almost a solid mass in their leafy compactness.

Vagabond Dick was approaching a cluster of these trees that stood in a depression running back and deepening into a great canyon. He was moving in the shadows of a green, sloping bank, when suddenly he saw a figure appear above him, outlined against the sky.

It required no second glance to tell him it was that of a female—of a young girl scarcely fourteen years of age—robed in misty, spectral white.

The boy stopped speechless with amazement. He was not a coward by any means, yet possessed some of that inborn superstition of the borderman, and that he was gazing upon a spirit form he had not a doubt. But it was fair to gaze upon. A lovely face set in a wealth of golden hair looked down upon him.

Dick fixed his big, boyish eyes upon her in a speechless admiration that was not unmixed with fear. For full two minutes he stood thus transfixed, when the silence was broken by a voice inquiring:

"Who are you?"

The words came from the lips of the spectral figure.

"Great guns!" said Dick to himself, "that's no spirit—it's a fairy or I'm a fool."

The last words involuntarily fell aloud from the boy's lips.

"Well, I guess you're a fool," was the unfairy like response of the figure on the bank.

Vagabond Dick was a rough, outspoken boy, almost totally ignorant of the courtesies usually shown the opposite sex. But for this he was not to blame. His life had been one of vagabondage among the rude miners, cowboys, and hunters—knowing nothing of the refining influence of women's society. In fact, he regarded woman as an inferior being, but this came of an education received in the Indian camp where the females are silent, patient and dumb slaves. The only female creature the Indian held in respect was the legendary spirit and fairy, hence Dick's awesome admiration. But the reply he received from the one before him took a great deal of the saint-like poetry out of his ideal fairy, and his reply was in accordance with his disappointment when he said:

"Holy guns! you're most darned saucy for a fairy."

"Who are you that speaks to me like a young ruffian?" was the rebuke he promptly received.

"See here, gal," Dick replied in a rebellious tone, "if I'm a young ruffian and vagabond, I've been told of it by every gasted galoot in this kentry. I've been kicked and cuffed by the rubbish of minin' camps; I've been abused by every old buck Injin, and made mouths at by every greasy old squaw out of Satan's pit; and now I think it goin' a little too fur when a fairy'll stand up and call me wicked names. Dashed if I'll stand it—I'll fight or run afore I will stand it."

A clear, merry peal of laughter burst from the girl's lips.

"You're a sensitive little soul," replied the maiden with slight sarcasm in her voice, "and if you'll come with me to the clouds I'll give you some ambrosia to drink and put—"

"Thank ye, ma'am," blurted Dick. "I don't drink—you can't drug me on yer new-fangled liquors and rob me—"

"Rob you? rob you of what?" And again the strange little nymph of the night burst into a peal of laughter.

"Of my life, that's what," he replied; "but say,"—and he spoke in a more conciliatory tone, "let's shake and call it square; I've no time to stand here and quarrel with a fairy that's got more lip than 'Orphan Sybil' over to Custer."

As he concluded he advanced toward the girl, but the latter retreated and when he reached the top of the bank he saw, to his horror and surprise, the girl standing in mid-air under one of the great cottonwoods hard by. He could see her but faintly in the shadow of the tree. She appeared to be swaying lightly to and fro, with no other means of support than the air surrounding her. A feeling of superstitious awe filled the breast of the boy. In speechless wonder he stood and gazed upon the floating figure. He revolved the mystery over and over in his mind, but before he could arrive at any satisfactory conclusion, the girl disappeared—faded away like mist before the morning sun.

Vagabond Dick turned and walked toward the tree, and just as he reached its shadows his attention was attracted by a horrible object, mov-

ing along just beyond, that sent a shudder to his soul. The moon falling full upon the object revealed a white, ghastly looking thing with black horn-like arms reaching out as if to seize you. Under these arms were great lusterless eyes, and still under the eyes were black nostril cavities.

Had this demon object not been possessed of life, moving along, Dick would have taken it for the white skull of a buffalo with which the valley and plain lay strewn. It was moving down the canyon. The body that carried it was concealed behind the bank.

Dick waited until it had passed. The mysteries of that valley were multiplying around him, and he began to feel as though he were treading within the precincts of spirits and demons. But as soon as the mysterious object had passed out of sight he crept from the shadows of the tree over the bank, and followed in the direction it had gone. He soon came in sight of it, when he saw that under that ghastly head and face was the form of a man. This convinced him that it was a foe, either a robber or Indian in mask, and the youth raised his rifle and was about to fire upon him when he disappeared; but he followed on in hopes of getting a shot. The ground became uneven and somewhat broken, and to his disappointment the unknown dodged him among the shadows.

Suddenly Dick was startled by the report of firearms coming from the direction of the camp. That his friends were in trouble he had not a doubt. He quickened his footsteps. The sound of conflict rolled up the valley clear and startling. Yells like those of Indians were mingled in the discharge of firearms, leaving no doubt in the mind of Vagabond Dick but that the Indians had found the Brigade, pounced upon them, and perhaps murdered them all. Even while revolving these terrible thoughts in his mind the sound of conflict ended.

The youth stopped to listen. He heard the rush of feet behind him. He turned quickly and saw three of those horrible-looking, horn-headed creatures rushing upon him from the black mouth of a "wash-out!" Before he could raise an arm in his defense the youth received a blow from one of the demons that sent him, half unconscious to the earth. When he had fully recovered his senses he found he had been disarmed and his hands securely bound.

One of his captors, speaking in the guttural English of an Indian, ordered him to rise.

Dick sprang to his feet. One of his captors held a tomahawk over his head, and the brave boy expected it to go crashing into his whirling brain any moment.

In the moonlight he saw that his captors, faces were covered with masks made of the skulls of buffalo, or at least the upper part of the skull to which the black horns still adhered. All the inside bones of the skull being removed, nothing but a thin shell remained making a light, ingenious and horrible looking mask that sat upon the head and over the face, and was held in position by thongs of deerskin passing around the horns and down the side of the face to the shoulders where they were fastened to a sort of a harness passing under the arms and over the back.

Vagabond Dick could not see the faces of his captors, but he knew by the blankets girded around their waists, and by their weapons, as well as their poor English, that they were Indians; and so quiet submission would be his only salvation; and if the savages were not in league with the road-agents—if they were not urged on by Blackhawk Bill's devilish vengeance, he might stand a chance of escape in the distant if not in the near future.

CHAPTER VII.

A BOLD AND DESPERATE STRATAGEM.

AFTER some parleying Vagabond Dick's captors set off with him up the creek. They journeyed about three miles along the stream, then turned in among the foot-hills. Entering a canyon they followed it until they came to where a dozen of their friends were encamped awaiting their return, and where they were received with shouts of fiendish joy.

A camp-fire was burning at the foot of a great rock and in its glow Vagabond Dick saw a white captive sitting bound to a stake driven into the ground. From Little Hurricane's description of Calvin Stewart he felt sure the captive was that gentleman. Nor was he the only white man in that Sioux camp. Another, but not a captive, was there. It was the outlaw chief, Blackhawk Bill. The villain's face still bore the livid marks of his encounter with Little Hurricane. For hours had he been nursing his wrath in anticipation of the Indians bringing Little Hurricane in dead or alive, and when the three Horned Heads entered camp with Dick a look of bitter disappointment clouded his brow, and with an oath, he said:

"That is not Little Hurricane, the Boy Devil!"

"We find him all alone," said one of the Indians in disappointment, "and bring him to camp—other Big Horns go on to pale-face camp where white man there was captured. We hear guns—bang, bang—then yells—warriors come soon—bring white scalps—mebby Hurricane. Wooh! then have big scalp dance!"

The savages seemed highly delighted over this enthusiastic prediction. They seemed to think their friends would have no trouble in fulfilling it. Dick was at once securely bound to a stake, then all the savages in camp donned masks like those of Dick's captors, and began dancing like fiends around the fire, singing, yelling, chanting in a frightful and discordant manner. Two fresh scalps—evidently those of women—were carried on poles in the dance and flaunted in the very face of the captives in a taunting, devilish manner.

Blackhawk Bill stood with his arms folded across his breast and looked upon the dance with a sullen frown upon his face.

In the dim, wavering glow of the light the revelers in their frightful masks—stooping and posturing and writhing like serpents, looked like grim, grotesque fiends in an infernal orgie.

For an hour or more this continued, and would have probably gone on had it not been interrupted by the sudden appearance of a solemn, silent and yet horrible-looking procession that came filing out of the darkness into

the dull glow of the waning camp-fire. It was composed of six forms wearing those horned masks and the garbs of savages. On a litter they carried two lifeless bodies, from whose dusky faces the masks had been removed, while at the head of the procession—with bared head and downcast eyes—his hands tied at his back—marched Little Hurricane, the Boy Captain, a helpless captive.

A groan burst from the lips of Vagabond Dick and the other captive as their eyes fell upon the gallant young ranger.

A fierce, triumphant and vindictive oath burst from the lips of Blackhawk Bill, and grasping a knife he started toward the author of all his ills and disasters. But the boy's time to die had not come just yet; an Indian waved the outlaw captain back in a manner he dared not disobey.

The savages uttered a yell mingled with joy and sorrow—joy over the capture of the Little Hurricane, sorrow for their dead comrades.

"Hullo, there, Hurricane, you're in for it, too, ar'n't ye?" called out Dick.

"Yes, Dick, I am," responded the Boy Captain, "and I am afraid it has gone hard against the other boys. Mr. Stewart," and Hurricane turned to the white man who was a captive—"I am sorry to find you here."

"Too much talk," said a red-skin, slapping Hurricane in the face with a human scalp upon which the blood was not yet dry.

"Yes, red-skins," exclaimed the impatient Blackhawk Bill, "turn him over to my tender mercy and I'll stop his mouth with his heart."

The Indians shook their heads. While they gave the outlaw the freedom of their camp, they had no particular love for him.

"The Horned Heads had not the success they expected," said one of the Sioux in his dialect addressing his returning friends.

"No," replied one of them in a sadness of tone; "the pale-faces were on their guard—their guns are full of bullets that shoot fast. Two of our warriors fell, then pale-faces run like antelope and leave two of their dead friends behind, and in their blood we made red our hands;" and he held out his hands that all might see they were black almost with coagulated blood, as were those of his comrades, also.

A silence rested upon the lips of the defeated Horned Heads. They had gone out with such high hopes—rigged out in a disguise which, of itself, they believed would strike terror to the hearts of the enemy. True, they had routed the Boy Brigade, but their failure to kill or capture all was regarded as a defeat since two of their number had fallen. So they reported.

"Where are the scalps of the two pale-faces?" asked a savage, seeing no scalps were forthcoming.

There was a momentary silence; then the spokesman of the defeated party, said:

"We did not take them. The bullets of the pale-faces hidden away among the shadows were flying thick."

A cry of disappointment escaped the lips of the band. That a Sioux warrior should fail to take the scalp of a slain foe was indeed a humiliating defeat.

"Turn this Little Hurricane over to me," said Blackhawk Bill, taking advantage of the red-skins' momentary flush of anger, "and I will show you how to take scalps from the head of a living enemy."

The savages were growing tired of the importunities of this outlaw, who was really responsible for the defeat of their party. He had misrepresented the number of the Boy Brigade, and had objected to the whole band going out through fear that so large a party would be discovered and the Brigade escape. And, furthermore, while the Indians were out fighting, he was lounging in safety in the Indian camp; and now persistently sought the honor of Hurricane's scalp after all danger was over. But the idea of a Killkenny fight was suggested to the brains of the disgusted warriors. They would turn their captive loose upon their honored guest and let them exterminate each other.

A ring was at once formed and the outlaw and the captive placed therein. One of Hurricane's captors removed his bonds and offered him a knife, but he refused it.

A fiendish blaze lit up the eyes of Blackhawk Bill, and a diabolical laugh escaped his lips as he drew a long, murderous-looking knife and advanced toward the boy.

Little Hurricane stood with his arms folded across his breast.

His six captors stood just behind him.

A deep silence fell upon the scene.

Blackhawk Bill walked half across the ring toward the boy, but all of a sudden he stopped while his face became blanched with terror, for, quick as a flash had the boy jerked his hand from his bosom and extended it toward the head of the outlaw with a derringer clasped therein—for, again the captain of the road-agents found himself looking into the revolver of Little Hurricane, the Boy Captain.

CHAPTER VIII.

A TRAP FOR THE TRAPPERS.

BLACKHAWK BILL stood motionless glaring into the face of the boy ranger, the picture of baffled triumph.

The savages stood silent, mute and dumb with horror and surprise.

A stillness, deep and profound, as that of the grave reigned over all.

The grim walls of the canyon; the blackness of night above; the dull glow of the camp-fire; the striking attitude of those human figures; the grim smile of fearless courage upon the face of Little Hurricane; the look of fear and defeat upon the face of Blackhawk Bill who, clutching his knife, leaned slightly forward as if to make a spring—all these presented as wild and tragic a scene as the human mind could conceive.

The click, click, click of revolvers broke the momentary silence and suspense.

The horned masks on the heads of Little Hurricane's six captors were thrown aside, and lo! the Boy Brigade of Young Avengers stood before the astonished red-skins with a revolver in each hand, and each revolver covering a savage.

"Ho! ho!" croaked old Jack Drew, as he stood with both hands extended with leveled

revolvers, "by the sword o' Dam-na-ocles! we played it on ye that time, red-skins—so don't budge a peg, nor raise a hand, nor breathe nor bat an eye, or by the holy darkness o' ole Egypt, we'll drap ye quicker nor a hound pup can lick a skillet!"

Meanwhile, one of the Brigade released Vagabond Dick and Mr. Stewart and placed a revolver in their hands.

The guns of the savages were lying on the ground a rod away. Knives and tomahawks were in their girdles but they knew that, notwithstanding their advantage in point of number, one movement to draw a weapon would be a signal for the Brigade to fire. Moreover, the warriors of Sitting Bull, like the chief himself had learned diplomatic policy of the white man, and seeing the boys did not fire they made signs of quiet submission, and at once asked for an armistice—in other words, a "pow-wow." But the young plainsmen had no faith in the word of the wily Sioux, and stood well upon their guard.

Little Hurricane and Blackhawk Bill still stood glaring into each other's eyes, but the outlaw's courage began to fail him when he heard the warlike warriors suing for peace and compromise.

"Let the pale-faces sit down in council with the Sioux and make terms of peace," insisted a warrior.

"Oh, yes," replied Old Jack, "you're a sweet mess o' peacemakers, you are, seein' as what we've got the drop on you. You sent a dozen o' yer peacemakers down to our camp to peace afy us with bullets and tomahawks, but thanks to the vigilance o' that young rooster there whose scalp that white buzzard don't lift so fast as he did, we got wind o' their approach, and when they put in an appearance with their buffalo-horns poised so jauntily on their heads, we went through the hull pack like a school o' alligators through a family o' pickaninnies; and their carcasses lay where they fell on the very threshold o' our camp. We know that in comin' here we run great risks, but trusting to Coyote Sam for Sioux gab, and these clothes and blankets and masks o' yer friends, we sailed. You may know by our darin' that we're rip-roarin' russellers from Hagerstown."

Most of this delivery was lost on the Sioux but they appeared to understand it all, and nodded assent in a grave and knowing manner. When Jack had concluded, one of them again asked:

"Will the pale-faces sit down in council with the Sioux?"

"Show your own sincerity—that you mean what you say—by setting down fu'st yerselves," said Drew, and that they might understand, Coyote Sam repeated Jack's words in Sioux.

The Indians glanced from one to the other with a significant look upon their faces, then made a movement as if to sit down, but as they did so they grasped the hafts of their tomahawks and uttered a frightful war-whoop. But before their weapons were unsheathed—while their yell still hung upon their lips—the revolvers of the ever-vigilant Brigade rung out, and over half that savage band went down in death's eternal council.

The war-whoop of the red-skins inspired the breast of Blackhawk Bill, and like a panther he leaped toward Little Hurricane; but the boy had been expecting this climax, and pressing the trigger of his revolver, a bullet went crashing through the evil brain of the outlaw captain, and he fell lifeless at the boy's feet.

Terror-stricken, the surviving red-skins turned and sought safety in flight into the shadows of the night. The victorious Brigade sent a few random bullets after them to encourage their speed, then gave utterance to a lusty shout of triumph.

Little Hurricane turned, and calmly walking up to Calvin Stewart took his hand, and said in a voice full of grateful emotion:

"Mr. Stewart, I am rejoiced to meet you again!"

"God bless you, my brave boy!" responded Stewart. "I hope you can tell me something of my daughter, from whom I was so ruthlessly separated."

"I can tell you nothin' more than that I rescued her from the outlaws, gave her my horse, and sent her away in hopes she might escape to a place of safety. I since have found my horse riderless and—"

"Oh, heavens!" groaned the distracted man, clutching his brow, "this is too much for me to bear!"

"We live in hopes, Mr. Stewart, of not only finding your daughter, but also those of Ishmael Langdon, whose death we have sworn to avenge."

"Ishmael Langdon?" cried the man, "do you mean to say that Ishmael Langdon, the proprietor of Langdon's cattle ranch, is dead?—murdered?"

"He is, Mr. Stewart; he was murdered in a mysterious manner a few nights ago."

"Oh, heavens! heavens!" groaned Stewart, "this is multiplying my sorrows and troubles!"

"Then you knew Mr. Langdon?"

"Knew him? Indeed I did, and my daughter and I were on our way to visit him at his ranch—carrying to him the news of—well, it is no difference what, now. But, Hurricane, what do you know about his death which you say was so mysterious?"

Little Hurricane narrated the dying confession of Ishmael Langdon, as the reader has already heard it.

"Ah me!" sighed the man when the boy had concluded; "it was a mystery, indeed. I knew not that but a single man in America, besides myself, knew aught of the secret of Ishmael Langdon's life."

"And who was that man, Mr. Stewart?" asked Jack Drew, who had manifested considerable interest in the colloquy between Stewart and Little Hurricane.

"A detective named Prosper—Zelotus Prosper; but I have been under the impression he was dead. I read of one Zelotes Prosper being killed in trying to arrest a man in Southern Texas. If he is living he may have turned traitor and be at the head of Langdon's murderers."

"Mr. Stewart," said Drew looking the man

squarely in the eyes, "your name is not Stewart."

Mr. Stewart started and gazing into the eyes of the old hunter with a sharp, inquiring look, demanded:

"Who are you, sir, that makes this assertion?"

"Ho, ho, colonel!" laughed Drew, "your memory's short as your confidence, but then I reckon your troubles are what—"

"By heavens!" exclaimed Stewart, a light of recognition beaming in his eyes, "sir, you are the detective, Zelotes Prosper!"

"That's who I be, colonel, though my true name's Jack Drew. I wer'n't killed in Texas, you see, neither have I gone back on the work you gave me to do a year ago. These whiskers are what disturbed your recognition. Sorry, indeed, am I, that now, in the very hour of success, we learn that the villainy of some devils have been ahead of us. But the children of Langdon live."

"Yes," said Little Hurricane, "while I know not what the mystery surrounding Langdon's murder is, I do know we are on the trail of the murderers and abductors of Edith and Mary. They left the ranch in a light spring wagon which we tracked to the Beaver some ten miles below. There it disappeared, but by careful search we found where the vehicle had been burned and the irons thrown into the creek."

"They intend to make 'way with those girls," said Drew, "and all I wonder at is that they did not kill them too. But perhaps they received a consideration from some one to take them alive—some devils that will lead them a life worse than death. But we, Boy Avengers, will ransack creation over but what we find 'em gals dead or alive."

"Well, I pray Heaven your hopes may be fulfilled," said Mr. Stewart, "but now I am reminded of another fact that causes me considerable uneasiness. To-day, when left alone on the coach, as I supposed, I had climbed into the boot and taken the lines, what should crawl out from under the baggage on top the coach but a girl—a child of fourteen, with a lovely face and great, lustrous eyes. She told me her name was Sybil, and that she was running away, aided by the driver, from the wickedness of C—. She was greatly distressed when she learned the driver was dead, but I consoled her the best I could—promising to be a friend to her. We went on a few miles, and when I saw the outlaws were not following us, we stopped, for one of the horses was so lame that he could scarcely go. I unharnessed all the animals, and taking two of them and placing Sybil on one with her little bundle of effects, and mounting the other myself, rode away. We did not follow the main road, but turned off and came up the creek. It was my intention to follow the stream to its junction with the Cheyenne, then down the river to Langdon's Ranch. We went into camp about dark on this side of the creek, and while I was absent for wood, Sybil disappeared, taking her bundle of things with her. Ten minutes afterward, I was in the power of the Indians. And now, I'm not prepared to say whether she left of her own accord, or whether the Indians captured her."

"By guns!" exclaimed Vagabond Dick, "that reminds me that I had a quarrel to-night with a gal, but she's a real fairy."

"What do you mean, Dick?"

"What I say; I met a fairy—a real jolly little critter full o' sass and frisky as an antelope. She spoke to me and I spoke to her; she called me a fool, and said she'd give me somethin' to drink if I'd go with her to the clouds. I told her I didn't drink, thank ye, and she made a mouth at me, I guess, and said some rascally sassy words back, and when I started mad-like to'rds her as though I war jist goin' to eat her up, she skipped out, and when I see'd her again, she was standin' in mid-air, like a bird on wing, and the fu'st thing I knowed she disappeared—vanished—cut dirt for nowhere."

The youth's auditors could not repress an outburst of laughter.

"Ye needn't laugh," he went on, "I'll swear on a stack o' Bibles higher than Pike's Peak that every word of it's true, and to-morry I'm goin' to investigate the matter."

"Then the chances are that your fairy is my lost *protegee*, little Sybil," said Calvin Stewart.

"No, it can't be, Mr. Stewart; I've hearn o' Ragged Syb, and I know she's no fairy, but a reg'lar little spitfire that they say can shoot a pipe outen a man's mouth every clatter."

"Well, at any rate," said Little Hurricane, "we had better be getting away from here. Eight Indians got away, and they may return with friends and make this an unhealthy campaign for us. Moreover the death of that outlaw, Blackhawk Bill, will not end the road-agents' work, for while Bill was the nominal captain of the band his lieutenant, Montana Jack, is a far more daring leader and reckless desperado."

"That's so, and when Montana learns of the death of his leader, he'll rare back on his pasterns and make the air blue 'ith profanity. We'd better pull back to our old camp where those horses and dead Ingins war left."

So saying the Young Avengers destroyed all the outlaws' arms and ammunition they could not use themselves, then retraced their footsteps to the camp that had been so fraught with startling adventure—from whence they had gone forth in disguise to beard the lion in his den.

They found their horses as they had left them at grass, and the half-nude bodies of the Indians that had fallen in the attack upon the Brigade lay in the grass and along the water's edge where they had fallen.

A hundred coyotes were making the night hideous with their gibbering.

Removing their Indian clothing, the Brigade donned their own habits.

Philip Radley and Coyote Sam were to stand guard the rest of the night. The Indian turned and walked down the creek. Twenty rods from camp he came upon the lifeless forms of seven Sioux Indians. The Friendly was startled. Like an electric shock the truth flashed through his quick brain, and turning, he went back to camp, entering in a slow, careless manner not calculated to excite suspicion. Going to where Little Hurricane lay, he threw himself down by

the youth's side, and placing his lips near his ear, whispered:

"Hurricane, I found seven dead Ingins down the creek. *They* are the ones we killed. Those half-naked bodies lying within two rods of us at this minute are those of living Indians. The cunning devils are no doubt those that escaped us in the canyon, and are going to turn the tables on us. They moved the dead, and put a living Indian in each one's place, knowing we would never dream of such a thing. We are in danger. They may attack at any moment. We must be ready."

"Yes, if this is true, Sam," replied Hurricane, "we are in the jaws of a deadly trap that may be sprung any moment. Let us warn the other boys in silence, and be ready for the worst."

The two boys, still lying upon the earth, rolled from one to the other of their comrades and in whispers warned them of the close proximity of living, bloodthirsty foes.

In a few moments the Boy Brigade were lying upon their stomachs—waiting with cocked rifles and revolvers for the impending conflict.

The moon seemed to stand still in the starry sky.

The Coyotes ceased their gibbering.

A silence—deep and death-like—reigned over all.

Full ten minutes passed. Then a faint sound was heard. It was the snoring of Jack Drew. But Jack Drew was not asleep. In fact, he was never so wide awake. He was endeavoring to deceive the red skins.

Suddenly the watchers saw a tufted head rise slowly above the grass—saw an Indian face peer over toward them; but at the same moment a revolver in the hand of Little Hurricane rung out and a bullet crashed through the red-skin's brain.

CHAPTER IX.

THE CUCKOO'S NEST.

THE Boy Brigade expected that Hurricane's shot would precipitate the conflict. But to their surprise not another Indian appeared.

The moments wore away into minutes.

The wolves began to howl in the distance.

An hour passed, still the Indians made no demonstration.

The dawn of a new day began to streak the eastern sky.

Still the Brigade lay in momentary anticipation of an attack, but the light of day finally revealed the fact that the savages were gone.

The death of the one had warned them that the Brigade was on the alert.

"Cock-a-doodle-doo-oo!" crowed Old Jack, in the early morn, as he rose to his feet and whipped his hands upon his thighs; "another bloodless victory, by the sword o' Dam-ocles! Ho, ho, ho, the red-tallyhoopers crawfished out o' here nicely. The gay deceivers war deceived. They undertook to play tricks like the Brigade, but they can't come it—too old; they ain't got that boy sagacity to blunder upon expedients, that'll win every time. But of all the nights I ever experienced, the one just passed takes the rag off the bush. It war an ole bruiser."

So thought the whole of the Boy Brigade

although the experience and adventures of Little Hurricane had been far more dangerous and thrilling, and almost continuous for twenty-four hours. So it was no more than might be expected that the Brigade's wonderful vital energy was greatly reduced through hunger, loss of sleep and constant labor and excitement.

The first thing now was something to eat, and so Asa Martin and Coyote Sam went down the creek in search of game. In about two hours they returned with the quarters of a fine young antelope.

Having made their ablutions at the creek each of the party cut a slice of the meat, thrust the end of an iron ramrod through it and held it over a bed of hot coals to broil. Thus a hearty breakfast was partaken of, and after the repast was over the captured horses were led to water and again picketed out to grass. Little Hurricane's horse ran loose, though never going beyond the reach of his master's call.

The Brigade was unanimously in favor of remaining in camp that day to recuperate their exhausted strength and prepare for future work. So some lay down to sleep while others kept watch. But Vagabond Dick could do neither; he was restless and uneasy. He could not forget that girl, that fairy he had seen the night before. Some mysterious power seemed to be persuading him to return to that enchanted spot. Nor could he shake off the spell that wrought so continuously upon his mind and boyish curiosity; and so he finally took up his rifle and set out for the place where he had met the girl.

He soon reached the tree under which he had last seen her, but saw nothing. He looked up into the dense foliage. A pair of chattering blackbirds was all he saw.

Disappointed, Dick sat down under the tree and began whistling softly to himself, keeping a sharp watch around him all the while.

Suddenly he was startled by the sound of subdued laughter. He quickly sprang to his feet and looked up into the air above him.

Again he heard the laughter. It seemed to come from a tree further up the valley. He walked along till he came to a monster cottonwood whose trunk was not over fifteen feet high and from which great limbs put out at right angles in every direction, then shot upward again, leaving an open space in the center of the tree. The whole of this outer wall of twisted and tangled boughs was overgrown with wild grapevines and other parasites that found root at the foot of the tree, making the foliage so dense that the human eye could scarcely penetrate it. But Dick was certain that laugh had come from this tree, so he began a careful search. To his surprise he discovered what appeared to be a small cabin in the crotch of the tree. A second glance convinced him this was the actual truth; there was a small log cabin, built of cedar and cottonwood poles, with a thatched roof, standing in the crotch of the tree, its foundation resting firmly among the wide reaching limbs.

"So that's the home of that fairy," Vagabond Dick mused, and the next moment he saw the

vines parted and the smiling, roguish face of the fairy herself look down upon him.

Not a little confused the boy stammered out:

"You're a pretty fairy, now ar'n't ye? I didn't know fairies lived in log huts with grass roofs."

A clear, ringing peal of laughter burst from the girl's lips.

"I am glad to see you," she replied; "I was so 'fraid the Ingins'd get you last night, I couldn't rest."

"They did, but I got away; but see here, I want to know who you are and what you're roostin' up there for."

"Well, I don't know as it's any of your business, but since you are such an innocent-looking chap I'll tell you. My name is Sybil, and—"

"What, Ragged Sybil of C——?" interrupted the boy.

"If you want me to tell you anything you want to keep your mouth shut," the girl said, reprovingly; "my name is Sybil Hall, and when I lived at C—— the wicked men and boys called me 'Ragged Sybil,' but now I'm away from there, and never expect to go back. I used to live here with my father in this cabin. He was a hunter, but two years ago the road-agents killed him, and I was alone, so I wandered away from here, and some miners took me to camp, where I have lived ever since with Hank Bond and his mother. Poor Hank's dead now," and tears came into the girl's eyes; "but I'll die before I go back there. We used to call this cabin the Cuckoo's Nest. When I found I was near my old home yesterday evening, I strolled off up here to see if it was standing, and when I started back to camp I seen the Indians taking kind Mr. Stewart away a captive, so I came back here to stay over night. Now, who are you?"

"Vagabond Dick," promptly responded the boy.

"You look like a vagabond," was the outspoken answer of the girl, "but ar'n't you afraid o' the Ingins?"

"If I am, I'm not in as much danger as you be here all alone."

"I'm not alone; I've got a lady companion here named Clara Stewart."

"Clara Stewart? Great guns and daggers! that's the very gal Little Hurricane's dyin' about. Her father's down the creek 'ith the boys, nighly distracted, too."

A glad cry of joy came from the bushes behind little Sybil, and then the fair face of Clara Stewart looked down upon him.

Vagabond Dick greeted her with a soft whistle of surprise.

"Did you say my father and Little Hurricane were down the creek?" Clara inquired.

"Yes, ma'am, they are."

"Oh, thank the Lord!" cried the fair Clara, clapping her hands with joy; "Dick, will yor do me a favor?"

"You jist bet your boots, I will," responded the frustrated boy.

Sybil burst into a laugh.

"I want you to go tell my father and Little Hurricane that I am safe—that I escaped from Hurricane's horse and took refuge here with

little Sybil in the Cuckoo's Nest. Tell them to come up here immediately for Sybil and I are getting very hungry."

"I'll carry your words to them, miss, or die in the attempt. Your dad's almost crazy 'bout ye, as I said before, and Little Hurricane—well, I guess he's pretty sweet on you, Miss Clara, leastwise, he's fussin' 'bout you like he was."

Clara blushed crimson at the rude yet honest youth's remarks, and yet his words sent a glad thrill to her young heart.

"You're sure," called out Sybil, "that you're not a little, rascally road-agent, are you?"

"Oh, Sybil! don't talk so," expostulated Clara."

"No," replied Dick, "I'm no more a road-agent than you are an angel, and that I see in daylight lacks a dashed sight; but you can't pick a quarrel with me, and so I'll be off to camp, and run the Brigade up."

The boy turned and hurried away with a light footstep and a happy heart.

Sybil and Clara watched him through an opening in the foliage until he was out of sight.

"He is a brave little fellow, I dare say," said Clara.

"Yes; he's the very little rat I talked with last night at the foot of the tree," replied Sybil.

"And, has come up here to-day to inquire into your strange disappearance; but, Sybil, I should have thought you would have died living here."

"Oh no, Clara; I was very happy here when father was alive and lived with me. We lived here two years, and it was real jolly. The birds would come and build their nests in the trees and sing, oh, so merrily. I don't know who built the Cuckoo's Nest; it was here when we came and so we took possession of it and for that reason papa called it the Cuckoo's Nest—he said the cuckoo always laid her eggs in some other bird's nest. So well is the cabin concealed that one day a party of hunters camped near here for an hour and didn't discover it; and once Blackhawk Bill and a troop of his men galloped right along under here, so close that I could have scalded them. No, I would rather live here alone than to live up at the mines where there's so many wicked people. I'm not a bit afraid, Clara, for I can shoot like a road-agent. You see this little revolver?—I found that yesterday upon the coach. Your father said it was called a derringer."

Thus the girls conversed for some time; then they entered the cabin, and sat down to await the coming of their friends.

The day was quite warm, yet a slight breeze stirred the foliage into a gentle murmur, creating a pleasant draught in and around the little cabin.

In the course of ten minutes Clara, who was growing impatient to see her father, rose, and walking to the door, looked out.

As she did so she staggered back, her eyes fixed in her head and her face blanched with horror.

"Look, Sybil! Oh, God! look there!" she gasped.

Little Sybil looked out. A bridge made of

wire and sticks ran from the door of the cabin along through the branches into the adjoining tree, by means of which and a rope-ladder, that was always kept concealed when not in use, access to the cabin was had. Along this bridge, supporting himself upon the limbs, the maiden beheld a hideously-painted Indian crawling with the stealth of a panther toward the cabin.

CHAPTER X.

A FEARFUL LEAP FOR LIBERTY.

As her eyes fell upon the savage intruder of the Cuckoo's Nest, Sybil thrust her hand into her pocket and drew forth her little derringer, and with all the deliberate coolness of one accustomed to such dangers raised it and fired at the head of the red-skin. As the report of the weapon rung out, a cry pealed from the lips of the intruder who, clutching frantically at the boughs, reeled, tottered and finally went crashing to the earth with a sickening thud.

"There!" said the brave little heroine, "that Injun 'll not fool around another Cuckoo Nest."

"Sybil, you are truly a wonderful girl," said Clara.

Sybil accepted the compliment with a smile, and then walking to the door looked out, and the sight that met her gaze sent a shudder of terror to her brave young heart. A score of painted savages and several white men were under the tree preparing to invade the Nest.

"Clara, I'm afraid we'll be captured!" she said. "Oh, if Vagabond Dick and his friends would only come now."

"Let us hope for the best," said Clara.

But their hopes were in vain. The savages began climbing the tree by aid of the vines. Sybil emptied the last chamber of her revolver at them with good effect, but they swarmed up the tree furious with rage over the death of two of their friends, seized the girls and bound them. Then by means of ropes tied around their waists they were lowered to the earth where they were taken in custody by white men and placed upon the backs of horses.

The Indians plundered the cabin, set it on fire, sprung to the ground and beat a hasty retreat into the hills.

In Sybil, her captors found a refractory spirit. They could overcome her physical resistance, but they could not subdue her defiant spirit, and the result was that while she afforded her captors considerable amusement, she also caused them no little trouble.

Clara Stewart was placed in charge of a white man whom she recognized as one of her captors of the previous day; and soon the fact was developed that he was the outlaw lieutenant, Montana Jack.

After an hour's travel the Indians and outlaws separated, the latter taking the girls.

Being on horseback, the villains pushed rapidly into the hills with their fair captives; and after hours of weary riding along black, sinuous windings up dangerous acclivities and down steep descents, they entered the mouth of a black canyon which gradually grew narrower and darker until it terminated in a gloomy cavern. Into this the outlaws rode and dismounted

with their captives, who were at once conducted through the dark passage into a brilliantly-lighted apartment. Here they were given in charge of a tall, dark-faced woman, who gazed upon them with the look of a smiling ogress.

"Charming little dearies," she exclaimed, as her serpent-like eyes flashed like beads of fire, "welcome, thrice welcome to the retreat of Blackhawk Bill—the crystal palace of Queen Ursula."

Clara, sobbing as though her heart would break, permitted the "queen" to remove her hat, and then she sat down upon an easy, cushioned chair; but little Sybil was still defiant and resentful, and in a scornful tone exclaimed:

"Keep away from me, old Ursula! I hate the looks of you—you are the queen of darkness—the mother of ogress and witches, and I'll stick a dagger into your heart if you come near me!" and she snatched a dagger from a table at her side and thrust it at the woman in a threatening manner.

Ursula screamed in a hoarse tone to the men who had gone out.

Montana Jack came back, seized the girl, and wrenched the blade from her little hand.

Sybil flew into a passion, darted out of the room into the main cavern, where all was darkness. But she soon got enough of this gloom, and after groping around awhile returned to the lighted chamber.

"Ha! ha!" laughed Ursula, "so you thought you'd return to the palace, eh?"

"Yes, I wanted to see what an old black witch—the mother of Satan—looks like," responded the girl; "I've heard of such people as you, before."

Thus the badinage of words went on between the woman and the girl with all the bitterness of their woman's nature.

Clara, in the mean time, had quieted her feelings the best she could. She carefully examined her surroundings. The chamber in which they sat was large and commodious with high ceiling from the depths of whose darkness twinkled the points of stalactites like tiny stars. The walls were relieved of their rocky barrenness by hangings of dressed deerskins and fancifully wrought robes.

In one corner stood a number of rifles. Hard by lay a great heap of plunder, including saddles, blankets, valises, overcoats and even mail-bags. There was also a large umbrella or sun-shade in the heap. It was covered with heavy white canvas and made strong and stout so as to stand the fierce winds of the plain—to shed either the beating rain or the burning sun. Upon it the maiden saw the initials, "U. S. Ex. Co.," printed with black ink, and it occurred to her that she had seen just such an umbrella before. A moment's reflection recalled the fact that it was but a few days previous that she and her father had met a stage-coach on the road and that the driver and Express messenger had just such an umbrella, or shade, over them—marked with the same initials. So the presence of the umbrella there told its own story—of the attack upon and robbery of the Express.

Sybil was as inquisitive as defiant. She

wandered about the great chamber examining every thing with a childish curiosity. Nor could the frowning Ursula, by threats of everything direful, cause her to desist from those liberties. She found a tin horn in her rambles and slipping up behind Ursula fairly raised the queen off her royal feet with a fierce blast in her ear. Sybil burst into a ringing peal of laughter. A dozen outlaws came hurrying into the chamber, startled by the sound of the horn that rolled like pent-up thunder through the cavern; and they came just in time to prevent Ursula wreaking summary vengeance upon the girl.

"If you don't tie that she-brat up, I'll smother her," the ogress cried.

"Charm her, why don't you?" cried one of the men.

"Charm a wild-cat, will you? there's more animal magnetism in that little hyena than forty timid heiresses."

The woman spoke in riddles, but with great earnestness.

Sybil saw that she would be deprived of her freedom of the cavern unless she mended her ways, and so she promised the men and old Ursula that she would behave herself if they would not tie her up. Upon this promise she was permitted to go at liberty about the place.

For the next hour she sat comparatively quiet, patting her feet and humming to herself as she counted and recounted the flashing stalactites in the black dome overhead. Ursula saw that it was utterly impossible for the girl to keep perfectly still—to completely subdue her young, impulsive spirit, and so the "queen" resolved to adopt a more conciliatory course toward her in order to gain complete control over her; and so, finally, when occasion offered, she said:

"Girls, if you'd like to take a walk with me, I'll show you the wonders of this great cavern."

"Its greatest curiosity is the witch that lives in it," retorted Sybil.

The queen laughed sardonically and taking up a lamp in one hand, and Clara's hand in the other, said to Sybil:

"Come on now, if you want to go with us."

Ursula led the way out into the great dismal cavern and along its winding passages. Sybil strolled along behind, whistling merrily as a boy, ever and anon laughing at the echoes that repeated her sprightly lays.

Presently the light of day appeared through an opening before them. Ursula set her lamp down, and walking on they soon came to an outlet to the cavern where the bright sun and free air of heaven kissed the cheeks of the captive girls, and revealed more fully the cold, cruel and clammy face of Ursula.

At the very threshold of the cavern Clara started back with a little cry. She saw that another step would have hurled her off a precipice into a deep black gorge hundreds of feet below. She glanced upward and beheld frowning cliffs hanging over them.

"This is a grand and picturesque view!" exclaimed Ursula waving her hands out before her; "but it is death, death to him who attempts to escape this way."

"Oh, it's prodigious!" said Sybil, sarcasti-

cally, and then placing her hands upon her knees she craned her neck and deliberately gazed down into the abyss below; "it makes my head swim, Clara," she went on, "to look away down there. But oh, if I had wings now, like a bird, wouldn't I sail out a-whistling over this place? my!"

"If you'd wings I'd clip them," said Ursula with a bland smile; "I don't want you to think you will escape from here alive for you will not. There are several gay young men belonging to our band who will be only too glad to make you their wives as soon as Captain Bill's death has been avenged, and all gets settled down. You will like the wild free life of a mountaineer's wife when once you become accustomed to it. It is really charming—romantic."

"I don't mean to stay here, old Jawbones!" said Sybil with a desperate flash of the eyes, and turning she glided back into the cavern, took up the lamp and retraced her steps to Ursula's chamber.

In a few minutes she returned carrying the large, white umbrella upon which Clara had seen the initials "U. S. Ex. Co." marked.

"Child, what are you going to do with that old sun-shade?" Ursula asked, beginning to lose her temper again.

"Keep the sun off while we stand out here," replied Sybil, raising the umbrella and holding it over her. "I'm afraid if I get as black and musty as you I'll turn to a witch, too."

"You little tyrant, I want you to stop that impudence or I will strangle you!" the woman exclaimed, flying into a passion and turning upon the girl like an infuriated tigress.

Sybil, returning her look, uttered a low, tantalizing hiss. The "queen" started toward her, her fingers working nervously.

"I'll leap over this cliff if you come near me!" Sybil cried.

"Leap to your death, you little she-devil!" hissed the woman, advancing upon her.

"Farewell, Clara," called the desperate little Sybil, and then turning and still clinging to the umbrella, deliberately leaped over the precipice.

A scream burst from Clara's lips.

Ursula in the blindness of her fury attempted to seize the girl as she sprung from the ledge, but missing her aim she staggered on the edge of the precipice—lost her balance and falling over the ledge, went screaming downward to a horrible death below!

Little Sybil clinging to the handle of her umbrella with that intuitive desperation with which a drowning man clings to a straw, shot downward a few feet and then seemed to stop almost still in mid-air, for the great umbrella, filling with air, was tugging and swaying and straining as if to break from the load dragging it down into the black abyss.

Clara looked down after her young, reckless friend, and was horrified to see her with wild, excited face, and streaming hair swinging in mid-air to the umbrella which, acting upon the principle of a parachute, settled slowly under the little human weight pulling it down.

Whether Sybil was aware of what the result of her wild leap with the umbrella would be or not, it was certainly a bold and daring act for

the girl; yet one which delivered her in safety from the power of the road-agents, for, after a few moments swaying and swinging in the air her feet touched the earth where the body of Ursula lay a broken bleeding mass of flesh.

The girl was, for a moment, half-delirious with her perilous ride from the dizzy heights; but recovering her composure, she looked up, waved her little hand to Clara and then turning sped down the canyon—whither, she knew not.

When she had disappeared from view, Clara Stewart felt a horrible sense of loneliness steal over her that almost paralyzed her poor aching heart. She was alone with the outlaws!

CHAPTER XI.

LITTLE HURRICANE'S DARING RIDE.

IN a beautiful valley watered by the Beaver which here assumed almost the importance of a river, and flanked on either side by a range of ragged, seamed and worn bluffs was located the camp of Sitting Bull and his followers. But it was only a temporary camp, where they had stopped for a few weeks, preparatory to beginning an aggressive movement upon their white enemies. While here, scouting parties had been kept out in all directions to watch for the Government troops and white scouts. It was one of these parties that had met with such disastrous defeats at the hands of the Boy Brigade under Little Hurricane, whose name and deeds of daring had been discussed more than once in the council lodge.

On the morning following the death of Blackhawk Bill and the terrible slaughter of the Horned Heads, the sun rose upon a wild and excited village. The defeat of their warriors by Little Hurricane fired the breasts of the war-chiefs with a spirit of terrible vengeance. Councils of war were called; wild war-dances were held in different parts of the village. The deeds of the dead warriors were recounted in wild weird songs, and every measure taken to inspire the living with a spirit of renewed desperation.

After their ceremonies were all over, parties were sent out in force to destroy the Boy Brigade; but toward sunset they returned with the bodies of their dead comrades slain the night before. They had been unable to find the Young Avengers.

This second failure cast an additional gloom and disappointment over the camp of Sitting Bull.

That night another council was called. All the war-chiefs were present, and he who had gone forth so hopefully at the head of fifty braves that day to destroy the Boy Brigade, rose and said:

"The followers of Little Hurricane have the eyes and ears of the antelope. They sit off on the hills and watch like the eagles in the clouds. When danger is near they flee like the spirit of the wind. When they fight they come like the hurricane, with death. And they never fight unless the evil spirit whispers to them that they can win. Their guns are long and have many bullets in them. Their hands are steady and their eyes strong. The death-bullet comes even when the voice of the gun is heard off in the unknown distance like the faint voice of the rising storm."

Thus the story went round the circle. The speeches that followed were but repetitions of the first. Little Hurricane and his followers, and their daring courage, were the sole theme of their eloquence. With all their savage cunning, not one could suggest a plan by which it seemed possible to circumvent those daring boys.

An hour went by.

A profound silence reigned in the camp outside.

The chief's lodge was used as the council-chamber. Hard by stood a neat little structure that was the private lodge of the chief's fair little daughter, Dove-Eyes, who sat therein toying with her barbaric finery—listless and unconcerned, while her father and his war-chiefs wrestled with the great problems of war.

Suddenly the councilors were startled by a cry outside the lodge. It was followed by a sound resembling the murmur of distant thunder, which quickly deepened into a wild, tumultuous roar.

A runner dashed up to the door of the council-lodge and shouted:

"Pale-face warriors come!" He pointed toward the north.

In an instant the council adjourned without ceremony, and the war-chief dashed out of the lodge and away toward the point of greatest excitement.

Sitting Bull walked out in front of his lodge. His warriors were running northward yelling like demons. The camp had been attacked from that direction. A few rifle-shots were heard mingled with the frightful yells of the warriors.

The chief's lodge stood on a little eminence near the creek and midway between the north and south lines of the encampment; and in a few moments nearly every warrior of the south side had passed north to the scene of conflict.

Dove-Eyes sprang from her couch and ran outside.

Amid the wild excitement of women and children that began to buddle around the chief's lodge, a horse that at first appeared riderless, dashed suddenly into camp from the south.

Straight toward Sitting Bull's lodge it ran, and when within a few rods of it a rider rose, centaur-like upon its back, with a lasso in his hand.

That rider was Little Hurricane, the Boy Captain!

With a "whirr" the coiled rope shot from the hand of the boy at the head of the chief, but the wary savage had time to take in the situation and he managed to elude the noose, but not the force of the rope which struck him in the face with such violence that he was felled half unconscious to the earth.

The women and children set up a fearful scream.

Little Hurricane drew rein and glanced quickly around him. His attempt to capture Sitting Bull had proven a failure. His eyes fell upon the gaudily decked figure of Dove-Eyes crouching in the shadows of her lodge with terror, and spurring forward he stopped at her side, leaned

over in his stirrups, threw his arm around her waist and lifted her bodily from the earth. By this time a score of frantic squaws had rushed forward, seized the horse by the bits, and even by the mane and tail, and the boy by the legs, and endeavored to hold him; but Hurricane spoke sharply to his horse. The noble animal seemed to understand the situation, and with a snort it plunged forward—plowed its way through the circle of infuriated squaws and dashed away with its double burden—hotly pursued by a hundred warriors.

As the Boy Captain sped away into the darkness with his little captive, the whole village, which a few moments before swept northward, now seemed to roll southward like a mighty wave.

Four men on a bluff overlooking the camp watched and listened in deep suspense. They were Calvin Stewart and three of the Boy Brigade. They were there awaiting the result of Little Hurricane's proposed attempt to capture Sitting Bull in his own stronghold.

The situation of the Indian camp and the location of the chief's lodge had been carefully noted during the day. Under cover of night Vagabond Dick and three of the Brigade were sent around to the north to make a bold dash into the camp on horseback and thereby draw the Indians away from the south side. Then Little Hurricane was to dash into camp, lasso Sitting Bull if possible, and drag him to a certain point where Jack Drew was to be in waiting to aid him. How well the daring youth succeeded the reader already knows.

The yelling of the savages went trailing down the river wild and fierce.

The smoldering embers of the Indian campfires were soon kindled into a glowing blaze, and in its light the watchers on the hill could see every movement of the frantic horse.

Half an hour passed when two horsemen suddenly dashed up the hill from the south.

It was Little Hurricane and old Jack Drew, the latter carrying Dove-Eyes.

They were greeted with silent applause.

"I failed, boys," said the daring young ranger, "in snailing the chief, but I did better by capturing his daughter."

The party hailed this news with joy.

"But she's a young wild-catess, boys," added old Jack; "she's already clawed the beard all off my face, and one o' my eyeballs are danglin' on my cheek; but I'll hang to her if she claws my tongue out."

"Not so bad as all that, I hone, Jack," said Mr. Stewart.

"Well, maybe not, but she's a little blister—quiet now, though."

A short and hurried consultation ensued. The Brigade was well aware that it was not safe to remain there, and mounting their horses rode away. At a certain point previously designated they were met by the rest of the Brigade.

Some ten miles from the Indian camp the Young Avengers came to a halt for the night. Guards were posted, the horses with bridles and saddles on were hitched near that they might be ready in case of an emergency.

Dove-Eyes was provided with a rude tent

made of poles and blankets; also with blankets for a couch. The pretty little princess's wild, refractory spirit had become subdued, and by this time she was as meek and timid as a fawn. Coyote Sam conversed with her and found out that there were two white female captives in the Indian camp, but whether they were the daughters of Ishmael Langdon, or Clara Stewart and little Sybil, they could not learn, for, all at once, the little princess took the sulks and refused to answer all questions.

Before lying down to rest the Brigade held a short consultation as to the morrow's work. The first thing to be done was to open negotiations with Sitting Bull looking to the exchange of captives, whoever those might be in the power of the Indians. But how this was to be brought about was the question. To approach a savage now would be as risky as treading among rattlesnakes; but so far Little Hurricane felt that he and his followers had been equal to any emergency, and could see nothing in the matter before them to warrant a failure now.

"If nothing else will do," said Hurricane, "I will call on Sitting Bull in person, and I'll tell you how I propose to do it."

The youth made his plans known, and as there was no opposition made, the matter was thus settled, and all lay down to rest and sleep.

Early the next morning all were astir, and breakfasting on broiled antelope, broke camp at sunrise.

The Brigade knew the Indians would be on their track early, and in order to keep out of their reach it would be necessary to keep on the move, but in the meantime they could keep in the valleys and about so far from the Indian camp until night again set in.

Vagabond Dick and Coyote Sam were deployed as scouts for the day. They saw several parties of Sioux, but managed their work so skillfully that the Brigade was not discovered.

As the day wore away and night approached they headed toward the Indian village.

Five miles from the village Little Hurricane and Coyote Sam left their friends in charge of Dove-Eyes and on foot started on their perilous mission.

Two miles from the village they separated, Coyote Sam going to the south and Hurricane to the north.

Full well they knew the savages would guard every approach to the camp against another surprise, and the only way possible to reach the presence of Sitting Bull would be by some route that, to the Indians, would seem impracticable.

Little Hurricane had his course marked out independent of that of Coyote Sam. He reached the creek above camp. Divesting himself of all his clothing but his pants, he entered the water and turning on his back swam silently down the stream. When near the upper edge of the camp he hugged the shadowy side closely. He was an excellent swimmer, the water was a good depth and warm. The moon never seemed to shine so brightly, though this was not in his favor.

The banks of the streams for miles along that lovely valley were scarcely a foot above

the surface of the water—a peculiarity of western prairie streams. Along these banks grew a fringe of long grass whose tops inclining toward the creek, trailed their tips in the placid waters. Under this grass our hero was enabled to keep his face concealed most of the time.

Within ten minutes after entering the water he was within the sound of voices all the while. Once he heard some one talking within ten feet of him, and stopped to listen. He understood the Sioux dialect better than he could speak it. The princess was the subject of what he heard. Her capture had thrown a gloom over the heart of every warrior.

Moving on the boy soon drifted to a point he knew must be near Sitting Bull's lodge. He stopped and listened. He heard many footsteps approaching. He pressed himself close against the bank with his face under some roots and grass. It was not a very comfortable position. A frog leaped off the bank into the water near his face. A little water-snake crawled out of the roots, and wriggled across his cheek—its slimy touch almost forcing a cry from his lips.

A moment later he heard voices directly over him, and suddenly something fell with a loud splash into the river causing wave after wave to break over the boy's face. This splash was followed by a dozen others in rapid succession. Hurricane was not at a loss to know what it meant; a party of warriors had come there to bathe, and in a few moments they were floundering and splashing within half an arm's length of him.

The youth was in dreadful suspense for several minutes. The waves dashing against the bank rolled over in his face. He was liable to be discovered at any moment by an Indian coming in contact with him.

For a time that seemed an age he was compelled to remain in that one position; but finally the bathers began to leave the water—one and two at a time, just as it happened. They had dropped their clothes and their blankets on the bank close to the water, and when our hero discovered this fact, he resolved on a new and desperate course of action. He watched for his chance and when he felt assured there was no one on the bank, and knew that those still in the water were out in the middle of the stream, he rose in the water, crawled out upon the bank, picked up a red blanket and throwing it over his head and shoulders, so that most of his face was concealed, started off on a little dog-trot toward the interior of the camp in imitation of the movements of those bathers who had quit the water just before he did.

Through the very heart of the village the young dare-devil made his way, though the boldness of the act itself, and the easy and natural manner in which it was performed, were all-sufficient disguises and guaranties of safety.

The youth passed the chief's lodge a short distance, then turned and walked back, and pausing at the door of the lodge a moment cast a quick glance around him. Seeing no one near nor making the least movement that indicated

suspicion, he pushed aside the curtain-door and entered unannounced. But the light of the spluttering fat-lamp that hung to the central pole of the lodge told him that the place was deserted—the chief was not there. That he would soon be in, however, he had not a doubt, and dropping his own blanket he picked up a gaudy and handsomely-wrought one of the chief which lay in one corner, and throwing it over his head and shoulders, sat down to await Sitting Bull's return. But the boy had scarcely waited a minute when the lithe figure of an Indian glided into the lodge, and raising a tomahawk over Hurricane's head, exclaimed in a subdued tone full of deadly meaning:

"Speak one word and you die!"

CHAPTER XII.

BURIED ALIVE.

THE Indian addressed Little Hurricane in the Sioux dialect as he held his tomahawk suspended over the boy's head.

Little Hurricane glanced up, and to his surprise saw that the Indian was the young Friendly, Coyote Sam.

Pushing back the gaudy blanket of the chief from his head so that the Indian could see his face, he shook his head, invoking silence.

Coyote Sam lowered his tomahawk, a look of surprise upon his face. He had taken his friend for the chief.

A few words of conversation followed. Sam handed Hurricane a revolver, then he sat down opposite him.

A deep silence followed.

Five minutes or more had passed when Sitting Bull came diving into his lodge, unconscious of the presence of visitors.

Little Hurricane rose, and stepping in between the chief and the door, presented a cocked revolver at his head, while Coyote Sam said, in a language he could well understand:

"Great Sitting Bull, we are here as friends—attempt to call your warriors and you shall die."

The chief was thunderstruck. He stood like a stag at bay, looking as if he doubted the evidence of his own eyes.

"Who are you?" he finally asked.

"I am Little Hurricane," responded the boy.

A look of vengeance flashed over the face of the chief.

"You shall die!" he said.

"Then you die first—your child, Dove-Eyes, shall die a captive in the hands of my followers. We are here as friends—to counsel with Sitting Bull. We will return Dove-Eyes to her lodge upon certain conditions."

The chief's countenance changed—relaxed its cold, fierce expression.

"Let the pale-faces be seated," he said.

"Not until you assure us that no warrior shall enter our presence—that no harm shall befall us."

"My warriors seek the scalp of Little Hurricane; but my child is more to me than all the blood of my enemies. The pale-face and his friend shall not be harmed while in the camp of Sitting Bull."

The Young Avengers sat down and uncovered their faces. The chief was the first to speak.

"Why did the pale-faces strike at the life of my child?" he asked.

"Because there are pale-face girls in the camp of Sitting Bull, who has dug up the hatchet and is waging war against us."

At this juncture a war-chief entered the lodge, but with a quick sweep of the hand, Sitting Bull waved him out.

From this time on the boys were restless and uneasy.

"There are two white girls here. They are the captives of Horse-Face, but he did not capture them. Pale-faces themselves brought them and sold them for ponies to ride away."

Hurricane and Coyote Sam exchanged looks.

"Have those men gone away?" asked the Boy Captain.

"They were here to-day," replied the chief; "they come back here to-morrow, then go away to the rising sun."

"Coyote, the Langdon girls are here," said Hurricane; then to the chief he continued, "Sitting Bull, if you will release those captives, your daughter shall be returned to you."

The chief smiled with bland, savage mistrust.

"Release my child and I will give up the captives," was his proposition.

One party was suspicious of the other, and each wanted to secure the advantage in the exchange. Sitting Bull was quite a savage diplomat. He had had much experience in negotiating treaties and exchanges of prisoners, and knew that he who secured the advantage in the beginning was sure to come out best in the end. The boys, however, knew that the chief was treacherous, and often broke his word on the slightest pretext; and realizing the difficulty under which they were laboring, Little Hurricane, in hopes of getting safely away from the village, said:

"Chief, we cannot arrange to exchange captives to-night. Let us meet when the sun is in the zenith to-morrow—away from the camp of the Sioux and the camp of the Boy Avengers."

"Where?" asked the chief, as an idea presented itself to the cunning old rascal; "will the Little Hurricane meet me on the Big Sand Hill over yonder?"

"I will meet you with two friends," replied the boy, "at the place you name."

"Then Sitting Bull will meet you and two friends, with two of his friends."

"All right, chief, with these further conditions: that no other Indians come near us, and that all who meet on the Sand Hill come unarmed and empty-handed. Will Sitting Bull agree to this?"

The chief reflected a moment, and then said:

"Sitting Bull will do anything to save his child. Let the pale-faces meet the Sioux when the sun stands still."

The hour designated was noon.

The boy rose to depart.

"The pale-faces will keep faith with Sitting Bull?"

"To be sure we will," replied Hurricane, "the pale-faces will not break their promise; the Great Spirit has heard me speak. We will now

return to our friends and prepare for the meeting to-morrow on Sand Hill. Good-night, chief."

Hurricane turned and stepped out of the lodge followed by Coyote Sam. As they did so both started with an inward shudder of alarm. Around the door of the lodge and before them stood a hundred warriors with knives and tomahawks in hand, and fierce, murderous looks upon their faces. Involuntarily they swayed toward the boys as they came out—raising their weapons to strike.

Sitting Bull came from the lodge and spoke sharply to his braves who immediately fell back, while the boys walked on past them with a firm, unflinching step.

The heads of the youths were bare, and the face of Little Hurricane filled the breasts of the savages with a tempest of fury that it seemed Sitting Bull himself would be unable to keep from breaking out into violence. However, both of the youths moved on calm and fearless—betraying no emotion by either look or act. They passed under the wolfish glare of a hundred pairs of burning eyes. The further away from the chief they got the more bold and demonstrative the Indians became. On either side they could hear a low faint murmur like that which precedes the storm. They were in a critical situation indeed.

At length they reached the outskirts of a growth of willows and vines. With a breath of relief they plunged into the shadows. A faint yell rose behind them. There was a rush of feet and a wild crashing through the brush. The Indians were after them. The chief's command of a safe conduct for the Young Avengers had been almost totally disregarded.

The boys separated. Coyote Sam kept south, while Little Hurricane turned to the left, and hurrying down to the creek, entered the water and swam to the opposite bank. Seeing that he had given the Indians the dodge—that they were trailing off after Sam, he crawled on all fours across the moonlit valley and gained the shadows of the bluffs.

Here the youth sat down to rest a moment. When he resumed his journey he ascended the spur of a bluff to a sharp ridge. He walked briskly along this toward the east. The ridge grew narrower as he advanced, and the first thing he knew he found it necessary to move with extreme caution. The ridge was of clay and gravel, and the floods rushing down the deep gorges on each side had been gradually eating away the earth at the foot—the dirt had kept sliding down from above, until a narrow edge resembling a sharp backbone, and fully fifty feet high, was left standing; and even this threatened to topple over under the boy's weight and hurl him into the abyss below.

Hurricane saw that he had made a mistake in taking this ridge. In places it was scarcely a foot wide, and while the sides were not entirely perpendicular, the depth of the gorge on either side was unknown—lost in the shadows below. Should the narrow bank give way and precipitate him into the depth below, an avalanche of dirt might be started that would bury him alive. But there was no retracing his steps now and he carefully picked his way along. He could not look around him nor far in advance, for he must

watch where every foot was placed. In this way he was moving along, when suddenly a shadow fell on the ridge before him. He quickly stopped and raised his eyes.

A cry of surprise escaped his lips.

Before him, and not five feet away, stood two men—one behind the other—confronting him. One was a savage, the other a white renegade or an outlaw.

A look of surprise was upon the face of the latter as well as the Boy Captain's.

Involuntarily the hands of each sought their weapons.

Little Hurricane still retained the revolver given him by Coyote Sam in Sitting Bull's lodge. The savage who was next to him seized his tomahawk, and ere the boy could draw his revolver, raised the deadly weapon to bury it in the youth's brain.

Hurricane saw that he had no time to use his revolver, and that he must act with lightning's quickness. Instead of jumping backward to elude the tomahawk, he leaped quickly forward, and as the hatchet descended it fell beyond the youth, and there being nothing to arrest its descent, it flew from the hand of the savage and went glancing down into the shadowy rift.

As he leaped forward Little Hurricane threw his feet outward and dropped astride the narrow ridge at the very feet of the savage. The latter, missing his aim with his tomahawk, was pitched forward by the momentum of his blow and fell upon the boy.

A struggle ensued. A pistol rung out, and the savage fell over lifeless and pitched headlong down the declivity. The outlaw, following Hurricane's example, dropped astride the ridge, and reaching forward seized the youth's right hand so as to prevent him using his revolver with effect, and endeavored to hurl him over the bank. But Hurricane was not to be overcome by brute force, and with the agility of a panther he leaped forward and seized the man by the throat. Thus for a moment the two sat almost silent with their swelling, quivering muscles strained to their utmost tension; then breaking their holds they clutched each other, and a fierce struggle began between the man and the boy. The ridge began to crumble away under them, and the dry dirt and gravel to rattle down the steep sides, while a cloud of dust rose and enveloped the combatants.

Fierce and desperate was the struggle, but suddenly it came to an abrupt termination. The ridge under them sunk away, and they were hurled with a mighty mass of earth down into the gorge below.

Our hero realized his new peril in an instant, but he was perfectly helpless, for amid the avalanche of blinding, suffocating dust and dirt he was carried down with fearful rapidity.

When his swift descent had ceased and he had time for a thought, he found himself in a fearful gloom with a heavy weight crushing the life out of his body. He tried to free himself from the grasp of the demon holding him down, but he was unable to move a muscle and then it was that the terrible truth flashed across his mind with a dreadful horror that he was buried alive—ingulfed in a living tomb!

CHAPTER XIII.

A FORETASTE OF ETERNITY.

THE horrors of a living grave—the most dreadful of all horrors—chilled the very heart of Little Hurricane when he had realized his situation. He had stood many times in the presence of death—at the muzzle of the deadly revolver which waited only for the word to send its leaden missile through his heart, but never before had he experienced the horrors of a living death. The very blackness of eternity along with a sense of dying with suffocation was paralyzing his heart. He felt the weight upon him growing heavier. He gasped for breath—he struggled for liberty—he threw every energy into one powerful effort and attempted to throw off his crushing burden. He failed, yet the earth seemed to yield slightly around him. His head appeared to be free—he could move it. A hollow, rumbling sound seemed to hang around him as though in a cavernous depth. He moved his head up and down and soon he was enabled to move his shoulders. Little by little he worked and writhed away until he succeeded in getting one hand free. This he passed up over his head and found there was an open space beyond. His heart gave a great bound, and by a mighty effort he succeeded in dragging himself out from under the dirt and gravel in a dark hole—black and dismal as the grave—yet, into which air, impure as it was, seemed to be admitted from some source or other.

Hurricane had no idea of the kind of a place he was in, but he fell to speculating over it and finally came to the conclusion that he had rolled under a shelving rock or land, which had been completely overwhelmed with the avalanche of earth that followed him down. How deep he was buried, and whether he could ever extricate himself or not, he could not tell; but he was not the boy to give up without an effort.

The first thing to be done, however, was to explore the hole he was in, and, upon rising to his feet, he found he could not stand straight under the roof which appeared to be of rock and to slope gradually downward. This left no doubt of his being under a shelving rock.

Where his late antagonist was the boy knew not, nor did he care particularly, so that he was beyond power of doing him harm.

After groping around awhile Hurricane sat down to rest and compose his throbbing brain and bruised body. He whistled softly to dispel the terrible gloom from his mind. Ten minutes had thus passed when the young ranger was startled by what appeared to be a suppressed sneezing. He listened, but as it was not repeated he concluded it was all imagination. True, the hole was filled with fine particles of floating dust which he was constantly inhaling into his lungs, and he was, at times, himself forced to expel it in fits of coughing and sneezing, and he thought it no more than possible that an animal or even his late adversary might be there in the hole with him. At any rate he remained quiet and listened. Half an hour had passed and he heard the sound again. There was no doubt of it this time; and now the next thing for him to do was to find out who or what it was in there with him. He had lost his revol-

ver and was without weapons of any kind, still this did not deter him from his purpose. He uttered a low whistle, but received no response. He repeated the whistle in a louder tone.

"Tee-chew! tee-chew!" were the lung explosions that answered him.

"Hullo, there!" Hurricane called, "who be you? wolf or human? Ingin or outlaw?"

"It's me," was the faint and unsatisfactory reply that came to his ears.

"Well, then, who's me?"

The answer came in a female voice, "It's me—Wild Sybil."

"Good Lord, girl! how came you here?" exclaimed the boy, moving nearer the little waif.

"I was hid here when some fools got to quarrelin' and fightin' up on the ridge and started an avalanche down over me. Are you Vagabond Dick?"

"No, child, I'm Little Hurricane."

"Oh, thunder!" exclaimed the rude, irreverent girl, "I thought you were Dick. Dick's a boss boy, I think."

"Yes, indeed, Sybil, but pray tell me what brought you here?"

"My feet brought me here runnin' away from the mean old outlaws. They took me to their cave, and I got away by jumpin' off the cliff with a numbrell' in my hands, jist like that Professor Jones jumped out of a balloon last summer at C—with one, and when I lit on the ground I run and run till I got here, and as it was night I crept under here to rest till mornin', but them fellers that got to fightin' spoilt all my rest and sleep. Old Ursula, the woman in the road-agent's cave, tell off the ledge when I sailed off, and she was just smashed all into puddin'. But poor Clara Stewart is there yet!"

"Clara Stewart? Is she in the outlaws' den?"

"Yes, she is."

A groan escaped Hurricane's lips. The fate of Clara had been uppermost in his mind ever since her disappearance from the Cuckoo's Nest, where she had been seen last by Vagabond Dick.

From Sybil, Hurricane learned enough of their situation to satisfy him that with some work he could tunnel out, and now since he had a charge upon his hands, he felt more resolute and determined in his purpose, and at once went to work. His hands were all he had to dig with, but the dirt being loose and dry, yielded readily to his efforts. For an hour he labored with but little headway. The dirt ran in upon him as fast almost as it was removed; but with dogged perseverance and determination he scratched away, until at last he was rewarded by a faint glimpse of the outer world.

A few minutes more and he and his little *protégée* were out of what promised a living tomb—standing under the starry sky.

The moon was still shining, and in its light both boy and girl presented a sorry appearance, their faces and heads being covered with dust and dirt until they could scarcely be recognized.

Hurricane reconnoitered his surroundings and finding the coast clear, started with Sybil for camp where he arrived in the due course of time, three hours or more behind Coyote Sam.

The escape of little Sybil from Blackhawk Bill's den and the news she brought, and the interview of the boys with Sitting Bull left no doubt in the minds of the Brigade as to the whereabouts of the three captive girls whose rescue Little Hurricane assured Calvin Stewart was a mere matter of time.

The remainder of the night was passed in listening to Sybil's story of her adventures with the outlaws, and to Hurricane and Sam's story of their forced interview with Sitting Bull, and the attending dangers. So eager and anxious were all for the time to come for the Sand Hill conference that no sleep came to a single eye that night.

By sunrise the next morning the party had breakfasted and were in the saddle moving across the plain. In a lovely little valley was tere by a small creek tributary to the Beaver they came upon an old, deserted cattle-ranch. The soil house of the adventuresome ranchman had crumbled to dust, but the stockade was still standing, and in the center of this upon a little knoll was a small stone defense or inclosure which our friends took possession of and called Fort Necessity. They turned their horses loose in the stockade, through one corner of which ran the little creek. Their saddles, blankets, guns and ammunition they placed inside the fort. A couple of antelope and a deer had been killed that morning by the scouts, so that the little party was pretty well supplied for a few days' siege which might not be altogether improbable.

Eighteen rifles, most of them taken from the dead Sioux, were at their command with a good supply of ammunition. The Brigade, including Drew, was armed with Sharpe and Springfield rifles, and every one of its members was an unerring shot with these long-range guns at from three to eight hundred yards; and should the proposed Sand-Hill meeting result in treachery or an attack on the Brigade, the latter felt that nothing but starvation could ever force them from their defenses.

About ten o'clock preparations for the meeting with Sitting Bull were begun, and an hour later Little Hurricane, Old Jack Drew and Coyote Sam left the stockade with Dove-Eyes for the appointed place of conference.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE CONFERENCE.

THE day was exceedingly warm, and upon the sand-hill designated by Sitting Bull as the place of meeting, the sun beat down fierce and hot. Not a spear of grass grew on the hill, which rose gradually above the plain white and shining as a snow-bank, and commanding a view of the country for miles around.

When our friends arrived at the foot of this sand-hill they saw that the Indians were already there—at any rate, they saw three persons on the hill; but they had no women with them, and through fear that they might not be the three expected, Dove-Eyes was left behind with Coyote Sam, while Hurricane and Drew advanced toward the party.

As they neared the trio, our friends saw that two of them were white men and one an Indian.

Sitting Bull was not there, and when he made this discovery, Little Hurricane said, in a low tone:

"If them fellows are here to meet us, look out for treachery, Jack."

Then they moved on, and approaching the trio asked if they were from Sitting Bull's camp, and upon receiving an affirmative reply, Hurricane asked:

"Where is the chief, Sitting Bull?"

"He is sick; Rain-Face comes in his place," replied the spokesman of the party; "we are here to effect a change of prisoners with you men, I suppose."

"Where are the Langdon girls?" Hurricane inquired.

"Yonder!" replied the man, pointing to a couple of female forms sitting under an umbrella at the edge of the sand-hill fifty rods away.

Little Hurricane was bitterly disappointed. He did not like the looks of Sitting Bull's commissioners. Rain-Face was a large, brutal-looking savage, who had evidently very little human compassion in his breast. The two whites were very little better. True, they were dressed in garbs that belonged to civilization, and their address was that of men of some education and intelligence; but their furtive glances and their countenances belied them woefully if they were not villains of the first class. They were large, powerful men, and in most respects answered Ishmael Langdon's description of two of the three men who had carried his daughters away, and then murdered him.

"I am sorry Sitting Bull did not come himself," said Hurricane.

"You, I suppose, are Little Hurricane!" said one of the men.

"Yes, and this man is Jack Drew, a noted detective."

The men shot a quick, nervous look at Drew. The name seemed to startle them; but quickly recovering their composure, one of them said:

"You could get no better terms of Sitting Bull than you can of us. We are here as his agents, with full authority to act for him."

"Well, what we want is the two Langdon girls and immunity from danger until night, in exchange for Dove-Eyes," said Hurricane.

A smile passed over the faces of the two white men. Rain-Face was silent and dumb. He evidently did not understand a word that was said.

"Then you consider one little princess worth two handsome white girls, and some boot besides, do you?" observed one of the men.

"From an Indian stand-point, yes," responded our hero.

"But we want some satisfaction for the braves you have killed."

"You can get that by fighting for it," promptly retorted the boy.

"You're deuced impudent!" was the profane and cowardly response of Sitting Bull's agent.

"We are here to talk business, not to quarrel," responded Hurricane, controlling his emotions in a manly way.

"But if it's quarrelin' you want," put in Old Jack, "you can have that, too. I'd rather quarrel than eat huckleberries and cream, and

I'd rather fight any time than quarrel. That's jist the kind o' bull alligator I be, and I want you to know our calaber afore you go to foolin' 'round the magazine."

"You speak, sir, thundered the chief's agent, "as though your confidence was backed by concealed weapons! Have you come here armed in violation of your pledge of honor to the contrary determined to carry by force and treachery what you fail to gain by argument?"

"Sitting Bull has kept little of his word with us," replied Hurricane, evasively; "he was to come himself—I have kept my word."

"Then you do not want to treat with us?" observed the man.

"We will exchange the princess for the two Misses Langdons," answered Little Hurricane, "and that is all we will do—nothing more nor nothing less will be accepted by us."

"That, then, settles the matter on your own terms. You waive your demands for immunity from future danger, we our claims for satisfaction for our dead braves. Let the captives be brought up and turned over to their friends at once."

One of the men turned and went after Edith and Mary Langdon. He soon returned with them, and at sight of Little Hurricane the maidens uttered a cry of joy, and running forward, greeted him with quivering lips and tearful eyes.

"Oh, Hurricane! so it is you who have secured our release!" cried Mary, "and I do hope you can tell us something of our dear father."

Hurricane was silent for a moment. He dreaded to break the awful news to the poor, suffering girls.

"I saw your father, girls," he said, "shortly after daylight the morning after you were taken away. He lived long enough to tell—"

"Oh, my God! Then father is dead?"

Hurricane was silent, while moans of agony came from the lips of the fatherless maidens. Presently he said:

"My dear young girls, your father's death will be avenged. The men who carried you away were his cowardly assassins."

As he spoke the youth swept his eyes across the faces of the two white friends of Sitting Bull, who stood listening to the conversation with apparent indifference.

"Then these men," cried Edith, turning with wild, flashing eyes, and pointing to the two whites, "are the murderers of our father!"

The villains were startled by these words that seemed to pierce their guilty hearts, and clinching their fists they glared upon the girl as though they would murder her with their looks.

"Sword o' Dam-ocles!" hissed old Jack Drew, "war we not here on the honor o' men, gals, I would avenge your father's death here on this spot quicker nor a hound pup can lick a skil-let!"

The two men gave utterance to a low, sardonic laugh.

"What a good thing honor is sometimes as an excuse for cowardice," replied one of the villains. "If you want to avenge any one's death, don't let your honor stand in the way of your will. We think we can defend ourselves against a pair of such runts."

Jack Drew bit his lip to keep back the rage boiling up in his breast. He saw that the villains were endeavoring to provoke a quarrel, no doubt trusting to their superior physical strength to overpower and defeat them.

At this juncture Coyote Sam came up with little Dove-Eyes. Rain-Face uttered an exclamation of savage joy and sprung forward to embrace the princess, but the girl leaped back as if from the blow of a serpent with a look of indignation and disgust upon her face.

Our friends were surprised by this strange conduct of the girl. Rain-Face looked mortified and disappointed. From the few words that passed between them it was evident that the young war-chief was a lover of the princess, but hated and despised by the girl with such bitterness that even his presence there in her behalf was spurned with all that magnificent scorn so characteristic of the royal little savage.

Coyote Sam had told Dove-Eyes of his and Hurricane's interview with her father, and of the fair and honorable arrangements made for the exchange of captives, and she was more disappointed when she learned that her father had not come to the conference, than was Hurricane himself.

So kindly had the girl been treated by Hurricane and the Brigade that she preferred their protection to that of Rain-Face and his associates, and shrinking back from their presence she stood at Little Hurricane's side.

A look of jealous scorn flashed in the eyes of the young war-chief, and pointing his finger toward the princess he exclaimed, with all the savage bitterness and contempt of his nature:

"Waugh! the princess—the daughter of the great Sitting Bull loves the pale-face boy who struck her father down and who carried her away a captive, and who has murdered her friends!"

"He is brave," the girl replied; "he is kind—he is not a serpent like Rain-Face."

This unexpected conflict between the girl and the chief threatened to complicate affairs somewhat, and in order to settle the exchange of prisoners before they grew any worse, Hurricane said:

"Well, the exchange of captives may now be considered as made, and so each party can go its way."

"Perhaps," said one of Sitting Bull's agents, "you would like to avenge some one's death before you depart."

"You'll hear from the Boy Brigade later," retorted Old Jack.

"Ah, hark!" exclaimed the renegade with a fiendish smile, making an ear trumpet of his hand.

The report of firearms mingled with savage yells came to their ears from the direction of Fort Necessity. That the Brigade had been attacked there was not a doubt.

"By heavens!" exclaimed the renegade, "there's a fight going on over there about that old stockade. I'm of the opinion that the Boy Brigade 'll be a thing of the past ere yonder sun crosses the meridian."

"The Boy Brigade, sir, can take care of itself," replied Hurricane, not at all frightened by

what appeared to be schemes of treachery on the part of Sitting Bull all around.

"No, sir, I am afraid not," the villain continued, "and if you three are caught with those girls you will all be killed. The Indians are furious and will take no prisoners hereafter—male or female."

"Well, we can die in those girls' defense, I am sure," declared Hurricane.

"It seems to me that it would be suicidal to place those girls under your care and protection since, in the present state of affairs, you'll be unable to protect them. I think, therefore, we will hold them until we find you are able to take care of them."

"You will do no such a thing, sir!" declared Hurricane with flashing eyes.

"You are impertinent, boy—you may ambush and shoot Indians—you may handle a rifle well—you may ride well and dash into an Indian camp when none but squaws are near, and carry off little girls, but you cannot thwart us—you have men to deal with now. By your own words, *honor* in this interview has ceased, and we claim the right, and propose to enforce that right, to protect those girls from savage massacre."

As the man concluded he and his two friends, by some preconcerted signal, leaned over and thrusting their hands into the sand drew therefrom three long, gleaming knives! But scarcely had they straightened up ere three revolvers leaped from their secret hiding-places on the persons of Little Hurricane and his friends and were leveled full upon the breasts of the three treacherous villains.

"This," said Hurricane, as he glanced along his revolver into the eyes of one of the renegades, "is no more than we expected, and we meet cowardly treachery with treachery justified. Come, if that is your game, we are ready for you!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE MYSTERY OF ISHMAEL LANGDON'S MURDER.

THAT the Indians would practice some deception the Boy Brigade had not a doubt, and they believed it would be criminal negligence to go entirely unarmed to the Sand-Hill conference; and the subsequent turn of affairs showed how near they were right and how well it was that each had carried a revolver with him. Had Sitting Bull been there a collision would have been averted, and that he was not there was doubtless the work of deception with the chief on the part of Rain-Face, Dove-Eyes' lover, and the two scoundrels that came with him; and it began to look after all—notwithstanding they were ready for the three commissioners—as though they would be entrapped yet.

Had Rain-Face and his friends, however, been confronted by men who had sprung suddenly out of the earth, they would not have been more startled and astounded than they were when they found themselves covered by three cocked revolvers in the hands of unerring marksmen. The looks that overspread their faces betrayed their inward fear and cowardice.

"Come," repeated Hurricane, "if that is your game we are ready."

"Yes, ripe for a fight," added Old Jack; "wade right in, gentlemen, and let's see which can get there first and deepest—knives or revolvers—big roosters or little runts. Forward, and balance on the corners—it's blades and bullets."

Ten feet separated the enemies. Edith and Mary Langdon stood just behind our friends while Dove-Eyes still maintained her position at Little Hurricane's side.

Sitting Bull's agents were speechless for full two minutes, then one of them managed to say:

"You dare not shoot for it will only add to your torture when you are taken captives, as it has been arranged that you will be by Rain-Face's warriors."

"Sir, we fear no threat; this treachery of Rain-Face has not the sanction of Sitting Bull," responded Hurricane; "but if you still wish, you can take the princess to her friends and we will go our way and take our chances."

"I will not go with Rain-Face!" indignantly cried Dove-Eyes; "I am no longer the captive of the pale-faces. They have made their word and honor good and I am free, and now I shall return with them, their guest. If little Hurricane dies by the treachery of Rain-Face, Dove-Eyes dies with him. This you can tell my father, the chief."

This was a virtual acknowledgment of her regard for the Boy Captain. The wild little savage had learned, in the short time she had been with the whites, to love her handsome, daring and manly captor.

"Dove-Eyes," exclaimed Rain-Face, "would disgrace her tribe, and bow the heart of her father with shame. Let her go with her friends to her people."

"I will not go with Rain-Face nor his white friends," replied the girl; "they have dishonored my father's name and the name of the great Sioux. Go, Rain-Face, and tell my father, I command you, that I am a guest of the whites, who have treated me kindly and whom I shall not leave so long as they are in danger from my people."

This was a great rebuke to the treacherous three.

"And now, gentlemen," said old Jack, addressing the two renegades, "it is my time to speak, and since you two white roosters have seen fit to try to betray and murder us with the intention, no doubt, of taking these girls back captives, when Dove-Eyes was rescued from our power, it behooves me that the proper thing for us to do is to take you in out of the wet for the murder of Ishmael Langdon, therefore you'll drop those knives and throw up your hands."

The men sneered at this command, but it was plainly evident that they were alarmed.

"You fellows are provoking your own death," said one of the villains; "look yonder and see that I speak the truth."

Involuntarily our friends turned their heads—permitted themselves to be thrown off their guard, when, with a yell the three villains sprung forward like demons with upraised

knives. The girls uttered a scream—the whites leaped backward eluding the murderous blades—three revolvers rung out as one, and the two renegades sunk to the earth while Rain-Face staggered backward with a shattered broken arm.

"There," calmly and coolly said Little Hurricane, "the death of Ishmael Langdon has been avenged."

For a moment excitement and confusion reigned. Rain-Face with a look of vengeance in his eyes turned and walked away in terrible agony.

One of the white men had fallen face downward and lay motionless in death, his red blood staining the white sands, but the other who had been thrashing about in agony suddenly started up, his face wild and contorted, and reaching out clutched feebly at space and then sunk heavily back with a groan, crying out:

"God forgive! God forgive me! Oh, Ishmael Langdon, you are here! have mercy, man! have mercy!"

His voice grew weaker, and weaker and finally sunk to a whisper. All believed he was dead, but presently he rallied and raising upon his elbow looked up at our friends with a wild, staring look in his eyes, and said:

"I hope you will all forgive me as you wish for forgiveness of God. Edith and Mary Langdon, come near me—let me tell you all—that I have sinned cruelly against you and yours—I want to unburden my soul before I die."

The girls advanced to the dying villain's side, and even while the crash of firearms and the din of battle rung out on the ears of our friends from the direction of the little fort, all listened to this dying confession.

"Girls, your father was my cousin. My name is Allan Dresden, and your father's true name was Harrison Dalrymple, though, strange as it may seem, he knew it not. We were both born in England. When your father was a year old his father and mother both died of cholera, and he was adopted by a man named William Langdon, who called him Ishmael Langdon. Your father also had a brother who became a waif in the wide world, and who when young drifted to America. Here he grew to manhood under the name of Joe Hall. He married, and a child—a girl—was the fruit of that union; but his wife soon died and with his child he came into these western wilds and became a hunter and trapper. Two years ago he was living down on the Beaver in a little cabin built in the forks of a great tree; I watched for him and one day he was killed—killed by my orders. His child is now in C—, and is known as Sybil, the Waif, Ragged Syb, and—"

"Ragged Sybil!" Little Hurricane cried. "No, she is not there now—she is yonder with the Brigade at the old ranch."

"Be where she may," continued the dying man, "she is an heiress to-day; this I know to be true. She is the cousin of Edith and Mary, who are also heirs to a fortune waiting them over the sea. This fortune descended to Wilberforce Dalrymple, who was the father of your father and Sybil's. I am satisfied your father, girls, never knew but that he was the son of William Langdon. His foster-parent had kept

the secret of his birth from him. William Langdon was advertised for in the *London Times* and in the course of time word came from Calvin Langdon that his father, the man inquired for, was dead. A special agent came to America and interviewed the younger Langdon in relation to his brother Ishmael. But he could give no account of him. He had not heard from him in years; but he knew that Ishmael was only a foster-brother, his father, before he died, having told him of his adoption in England. Search was at once begun for the lost heirs whom I felt in hopes would never be found, in which case I would inherit the Dalrymple fortune. I kept watch of the movements of Calvin Langdon and found that he was upon the right trail, and the only way for me to thwart him was to put the Dalrymples out of the way. So a few evenings ago I proceeded to his ranch accompanied by three male friends and a woman named Ursula Blake, whom I learned last night had fallen from a cliff and been killed. The woman was a powerful mesmerist, and the first thing she did was to place you girls under her influence and then lead you silent captives away. Then your father was forced to sign the name of Harrison Dalrymple—his true name—to a document purporting to be a will. Of course, it was made to appear that he had heard of his fortune while upon his death-bed, and the will, while it would have been worthless as against the other heirs, would have established the fact of his death, and then the property would have reverted to me. In all this work I have been aided by the man lying dead at my side—a noted London detective; also Blackhawk Bill and his men have ever been at my service. You girls we turned over to the chief, War-Eagle, as a consideration for his services. Then we went to C—, to await results, and while there I learned that Calvin Langdon, passing under the name of Calvin Stewart, and his daughter were in the town, and would take the east-bound coach in a day or two for Langdon's ranch. To make matters still more secure, I resolved to put him out of the way also, and so, with the assistance of Blackhawk Bill, who had become enamored of Miss Clara Langdon, and his men, we attacked the coach upon which Langdon and his daughter, as well as Blackhawk Bill and a friend were passengers. Owing to considerable mismanagement and the interference of Little Hurricane, the whole affair was a miserable failure. So I am responsible for the death of your father, girls, and the father of Sybil; but if Calvin Langdon is living, he will see that you all get your rights. And this morning—oh! how the devil has possessed my heart and mind!—this morning, when I learned that Sitting Bull was determined to give up you girls to recover his own daughter, Dove-Eyes, Satan again tempted me, and I prevailed on the chief to let Rain-Face, my friend and myself, meet you here and effect the proposed exchange. We deceived the chief as we intended to deceive you. We proposed to get Dove-Eyes away from you, then refuse to give up Edith and Mary. Rain-Face secretly sent his warriors, unknown to Sitting Bull, numbering about forty braves, to attack your friends and slay them while we

were here. 'Tis the sound of their firearms we can now hear. But, oh! the avenging hand of God has stricken me down; I can live but a few moments. A thousand demons are tearing at my heart-strings—I can scarcely breathe—my eyes—I can't see! it is growing dark! Oh, God! forgive—forgive!"

He gave way to his emotions and was silent for several moments, then he put his hand into a breast-pocket, and taking out a paper—the will he had compelled Ishmael Langdon to sign—handed it to Mary without saying a word. Then he opened wide his eyes and gasped a time or two as if trying to speak—clutched at his throat, fell back upon the sand, and—was dead. And so the mystery of Ishmael Langdon's death was no longer a mystery, and the work of the Boy Avengers was nearly done—their oath almost fulfilled.

Our friends, accompanied by Dove-Eyes, now started on their return to the fort. Fortunately the Indians had been beaten off by the long-ranged guns of the Brigade with great loss, and the little party succeeded in getting inside the stockade without further danger. And so the treacherous scheme of Allan Dresden to carry Edith and Mary back into captivity, and Rain-Face's plan to capture the Boy Brigade, had proven a signal and lamentable failure at the cost of many lives.

The defenders of Fort Necessity were greatly surprised to see Dove-Eyes return with the party; but Hurricane soon explained the outcome of the Sand-Hill conference, the death of the two white men, and the dying confession of Dresden.

As soon as Dove-Eyes found that Rain-Face's warriors had withdrawn, she went to Little Hurricane and said:

"Little Hurricane, I will go to my people now you are safe. Dove-Eyes loves the Little Hurricane, but he is a pale-face, and there are many pale-face princesses in the wigwams of his people. He is brave and noble, and will ever live in the breast of Dove-Eyes."

This honest confession sent a pang of deep regret to the heart of Little Hurricane, and it was with some emotion he replied:

"Dove-Eyes, I shall never forget you, and my best wishes will ever be for your happiness and comfort through life."

A horse was caught, saddled and bridled, and given to the girl to ride back to her friends. When mounted upon it she bid all good-by, then turned her horse and half-reluctantly rode away, with the blessings of the Boy Brigade and their friends.

The next work for the Young Avengers now, was to proceed to the hills and headquarters of the road-agents and rescue Clara Langdon, or Stewart as we have known her. Little Sybil was to go with them and point out the way to the cavern, believing that she could follow the route taken by her captors. The work would doubtless be attended with great danger but the Brigade never hesitated on that account, and so far had been equal to every emergency presented.

They were to start as soon as night set in so that darkness would conceal their movements

from the wary red-skins, and in sore impatience they waited the hours away.

Along about the middle of the afternoon two persons were discovered riding over the plain toward the stockade, and as they came nearer our friends saw they were females who, upon coming up to the fort, proved to be Dove-Eyes, the princess, and Clara Langdon!

Shout upon shout rent the air, and for a while all were wild with excitement and joy.

Happy indeed was the reunion of father and daughter, while Dove-Eyes was treated as a royal guest.

From Clara it was learned that, after Sybil's escape from the road-agents and the death of Ursula, the outlaws became greatly alarmed. They were afraid Sybil would bring her friends to the cavern, and since the death of Blackhawk Bill and half his band, they were in no condition to contend with a strong foe; and so Montana Jack resolved to seek refuge in Sitting Bull's camp with his fair captive, and at once carried his resolution into effect. When Dove-Eyes returned from her captivity and found Clara a captive in her father's camp, and learned that she was a friend of Little Hurricane's she assisted the captive to escape from the village, then taking her upon horseback conducted her to her friends in Fort Necessity. It was a remarkable case of gratitude on the part of the Indian girl, and one which will never be forgotten by the participants.

Again Dove-Eyes returned to her friends, her love for Little Hurricane having restored to him the idol of his young heart, Clara Langdon.

Never was there greater rejoicing than that which followed that reunion of friends in Fort Necessity. But in the midst of their joy they did not forget they were surrounded by danger, and about midnight the horses, bridled and saddled, were brought out, the women and the oldest men mounted thereon, when the whole party set off for the land of safety and civilization where, in due course of time, they arrived.

And now our story is about ended. We have only to add that Edith and Mary, as well as Little Sybil, the fairy with whom Vagabond Dick had quarreled, secured the inheritance of their fathers, in the possession of which they are now living in peace and enjoyment.

Sybil and Vagabond Dick, they say, keep up a regular correspondence with each other, though hundreds of miles apart, and in view of this fact, who knows what the future has in store for them.

Little Hurricane and Clara were together several days after their escape from the land of Indians and outlaws, and in that time the love that had sprung up in their young hearts in the midst of perils, had been avowed, and when they parted it was with hopes of a bright and happy future.

A year after the close of the events just narrated, a new and paying gold mine was opened in the Black Hills and operated by a company of eight persons. The name of the mine was "The Little Hurricane." The name of the president of the company was Jack Drew—that of

the superintendent, Harry Reynolds. In fact, the Brigade of Young Avengers had finished their work as such, and, changed to "The Boy Miners," they became known through all that region as the Lucky Lads of the Lucky Strike.

THE END.

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